



*a Groom
for Widow
Young*

Book #7
Sons of Nora White

CYNDI RAYE

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A Groom for Widow Young

by

Cyndi Raye

Sons Of Nora White Series

Book #7

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From the author of Brides of Wichita Falls and Brides of Mill Ridge, this spin-off set on a small ranch about an hour's ride from Wichita Falls is about a secret that has been kept from Nora White for ten years by her three sons Luke, Adam and Samuel. Because of the secret, the boys have refused to marry.

When Nora decides it's time to find mail order brides for them, starting with her oldest son, mystery and lies begin. You won't want to miss each book starting with Volume 1.

When do you find out the secret? I'm sure by the time you read the first volume, you will have a good idea of what happened, but it won't come out until volume 3. How does Widow Young play into this? You'll have to make sure to read all the books to find out!

It's best to read this in order, starting with A Bride for Luke first, then A Bride for Adam, A Bride for Samuel and followed by A Groom for Nora, A Bride for Russell, A Bride for Wesley

and

now

A Groom for Widow Young!

This is a special series for my readers who wanted more and like a bit of a mystery and ongoing secrets.

Chapter 1

“Catherine! Don’t leave! I’m sorry if I offended you!”

Cooper’s words rang out even as she drove the horse and buggy out of town.

She hung back for a moment to lash out. “You haven’t offended me! You’ve just shown your true colors, Mr. Murphy!”

With those words, she high-tailed it out of Cooper’s Ridge, not looking back. Her anger drove her on, pushing the buggy over the ridge that led out of town. It was time she realized he wasn’t the man for her. She was alone and she’d stay that way. No one was going to make a fool of Catherine. Not in this lifetime!

Catherine drove on, over the rough terrain, going a bit faster than normal. It was getting late, that much she realized so she was focusing on getting home to her farm when she took the turn too fast. The horse tried to slow down, then swayed to avoid a rider on horseback. She watched with trepidation as the horse’s strong muscles tensed then braced for a quick stop. The action caused the buggy to flip, sending Catherine head over heels onto the ground.

She had landed on her back, but part of the wheel of the buggy had trapped her leg. It didn’t hurt, but she was unable to push it off. The ankle began to throb as well as the hard

fall prevented her from getting up, having knocked the wind from her.

The man on horseback slid from his saddle, running towards her. She recognized him as a resident of Cooper's Ridge. "Ma'am! Are you hurt?" His shout stirred her enough to lift her head, sucking in deep breaths of fresh air.

"I'm fine."

He peered down at her, pushing the brim of his hat back. He rubbed a hand over his jaw. "You don't look fine," he said, kneeling down and perusing her from head to toe.

"Can you help me up?"

He tried to lift the buggy, but it wouldn't budge. As he was rather old and a bit frail himself, she doubted that he had the muscle strength to right the buggy. "I'm sorry, ma'am, I better go get some help. Looks like you may have some injuries. It don't look like your wagon is going to be much use in getting you home."

Catherine nodded, letting out a sigh. "There's a ranch down the road, right around the next bend. The White Ranch. Can you ride there and ask for some help?"

"Sure thing. You stay right here." It didn't take him but a second to get on his horse and ride as if a grizzly bear were chasing him.

Catherine almost laughed at his words. Where in the world was she going to go? She was trapped with her leg under the wheel of the buggy. Thank goodness, it wasn't putting any pressure on her leg. The wheel wasn't that heavy since it had

bent away from the buggy. She sighed, trying not to let the tears fall.

She had never felt more helpless than at this very moment. Years of working the farm without a man's help and raising two boys alone had been tough. But this, the feeling of utter uselessness, topped the cake.

She shivered. She had just put her total trust in a stranger. What if the man didn't come back? She'd be a target for wolves or any wild animal without her gun, which was somewhere in the buggy, to protect her. She'd have to remember next time to carry her pistol on her body instead of setting it on the seat beside her. That had been a stupid mistake, one she normally would not have made except for the fact a man had been filling her head lately, completely distracting her from all rational thought.

Cooper Murphy, the pastor of the church in Cooper's Ridge, had stirred her senses after a lifetime of not thinking about a man. She had worked so hard to build a life on her farm after her husband had died. That life had never included thinking of another man. Her boys and her farm had been her life. That is, until he came to town.

Cooper had bought his own piece of land, mapped, platted and registered it and now owned Cooper's Ridge, a growing town a small distance from their farm. The town didn't appear like much right now, but that didn't mean anything. More and more people were moving in, but slowly. These things took time, she realized. He was particular about whom

he sold parcels to. Even though some of the characters there had been shady at one time, they were now redeemed according to Cooper. Himself, included. He also made sure they didn't fall back into the wrong side of the law. Enforcing rules and regulations to live by in his town kept it a safe place.

Cooper was so handsome she was always anxious to get to church each week. Seeing him standing in the pulpit on Sunday morning only made her want him more. His dark hair rode a bit long on his neck and she wondered what it was like to run a hand through its softness. Those eyes, so dark and revealing, looked at her as if she meant the world to him. As if she were the only one he wanted or cared about.

Well, that was a lie. Anger boiled up inside of her like a cast iron pot heating on a fire. He may stare at her with the hungriness of a man who wanted to kiss her, but he was far from innocent. Not after what she had witnessed today. And in the middle of the church for Pete's sake! Every woman from here to Dallas was in love with the pastor. Including her.

Catherine had left the farm to bring him a late evening meal. Her oldest son Russell had recently wed and she had some left overs from their celebration yesterday. She had noticed the pastor had left earlier that day so she wanted to make sure he received a few things as a thank you for attending and speaking to the crowd. He was a busy man and yet he made the effort to attend. Even though her son and new wife were married in Wichita Falls, Cooper came out to

congratulate them both on their new life together. Taking the food to him was the least she could do. She had even tucked away a piece of the wedding cake for him.

Now she regretted ever thinking about him! She was a fool like all the other women in the territory!

With her basket in hand, she had mounted the church steps. When she had heard someone talking, she didn't think much of it. She hadn't even noticed another buggy out front. Nope, her head was in the clouds, deep in thought, anticipating how glad he would be to see her. Cooper always perked up whenever they met. He would tell her she made his day more complete whenever he saw her. Even though they weren't officially courting, she knew he had taken a liking to her. As she did him.

Well, that was a big mistake!

Right before she opened the large wooden door, she heard a loud noise as if someone called out. What was going on in there?

Stepping inside, her jaw dropped when she saw Cooper Murphy's arms wrapped around Miss Cynthia Anderson. He had his mouth against hers in a kiss that was so inappropriate!

Cynthia's arms were also wrapped around the pastor. With her body tight up against his, she was practically on top of him. They stood in the middle of the church, the pews on either side, the cross at the pulpit behind them shining like a beacon in the darkening church.

They hadn't even noticed at first when she'd opened the door.

Were they that enthralled with each other that they hadn't heard her enter the building?

Catherine gasped, her feet frozen to the wooden floor, holding a basket of goodies, disturbed by the picture the two made. Her heart escalated into a fast beat while her throat became restricted. Even if she wanted to, she wasn't able to utter a word.

When Cooper pushed back from Miss Anderson, he swore, which she thought odd and out of place for a man of the cloth. His body tensed as if he felt her presence. Turning his head, his eyes narrowed when he saw her standing there.

He closed his eyes for a brief moment. His face fell. Taking another step back, he peeled Miss Anderson's arms from around his neck.

He coughed, cleared his throat and nodded to her. "Misses Young."

Cooper behaved as if it wasn't unusual to be kissing like a madman in church, in front of God and the whole world! She found her voice as anger seeped up from way down deep within. "Pastor Murphy, I'm quite shocked," she croaked, wanting to make this about his behavior and not about her heart beating so fast she was about to fall over. Oh how she wanted to be the woman in his arms right now, being kissed by this man! Catherine shook herself. No, she wasn't going to make it about the two of them.

This was not acceptable! “I am shocked to find you here like this,” she sputtered, not knowing what else to say. Pastors did not stand in the middle of a church making love to a woman like Miss Anderson!

His brow rose. “I was also shocked!” he told her, ignoring the woman he just had kissed and walking towards her as if he hadn’t had that other woman in his arms. He had practically flung her away from him now that there was someone else there. Did he prey on women?

She took a step back. Her lips trembled. “This is a sanctified place of God. How dare you make it into something else!”

He held a hand up. “I can assure you, I didn’t intend to -”

She shook her head, backing up towards the door. She wanted to run out of there quickly. “I know what I saw. How can you preach the good word in here and then kiss that woman as if your whole life depended on it? Like she was the woman you would die for? How can you do such a thing?”

He came towards her, a worried look on his face. All she noticed was his physique, how he wore a dark vest over a long-sleeved shirt, a worn leather gun belt riding low on his hips. Cooper stood close enough she could reach out and touch him. He looked like an outlaw, not a man of God. His voice was low and gravelly. “I promise, Misses Young, I didn’t intend for this-”

She held up her hand, stuffing the basket in his arms before he was able to finish. “No sense in trying to explain to me.

You need to tell the man upstairs! Good-day!”

Before he was able to stop her, she ran out of the church, flying down the steps as if the devil himself followed. Catherine climbed on the bench and turned the buggy away from Cooper’s Ridge.

When he came out of the door after her, she commanded the horse to go faster. This would be the last time she’d ever step foot in this town!

He was the reason she was sitting in the dirt, a half mile from home, damaged. Her whole body and mind were consumed by his deceit as she drove faster than necessary to get to the security of her farm. In her anger and fury, she’d pushed the horse too much.

She had thought maybe the two of them had a chance at a life together. Especially since he’d been stopping by the farm for visits. Had she misinterpreted his visits? Was she the fool here?

Or, had he been working up the courage to seduce her like he was doing with other members of his congregation? Did the town of Cooper’s Ridge have a demon on the loose instead of a pastor?

She hadn’t stuck around to find out. But now she was in the dirt, fuming at herself for allowing anger at him to have led to the accident.

“Mrs. Young!” The voice was all too familiar. She looked up to see a few of the ranch hands from the White Ranch, along with Rusty, Nora’s husband, closing in. Just as they got off

their horses to help, her boys came riding out of the blue like they were chasing steers in a stampede.

“Ma!” Wesley fell to his knees, taking a hold of her. “Ma, you all right?”

“I’m fine, son. Just a bruised leg. Luckily, I wasn’t too far from home.”

Russell, her first-born son and newly married, picked her up, placing Catherine in Rusty’s wagon, tucking blankets all around her.

“Let’s get you home,” he said, ordering the ranch hand who drove the wagon not to rattle her. She had to smile. Her boys took good care of her.

Before long she was tucked in her bed with her neighbor Nora wrapping her leg. Naomi, her oldest son’s wife, insisted on sitting with her through out the night. She squeezed the young woman’s hand. It was nice to have a daughter-in-law who seemed to care about her new family. Catherine was rarely wrong about people and she knew Naomi was going to make a good wife for her son once she learned how to live life on a farm. A secretive smile played across her mouth. Naomi was not who she claimed to be. But the girl was sweet and caring and scared. Time would reveal the truth.

Naomi claimed to be from a well-to-do family, but Catherine knew better. She knew because women of that caliber had more grace than this girl who had absolutely none. At one point, Catherine had almost burst out laughing when Naomi tried to stick her nose in the air and had lifted it

up so far she lost her balance and tripped.

Russell was smitten with her. Watching the way he looked at his new wife made Catherine's heart happy. The two had things to work out, but she had faith they would do so. It was still early yet, especially since the two had one of those agreements between them that gave them both thirty days to decide if they wanted to stay married. She sent a small prayer to her Lord and Saviour to seal the deal between the two.

Now, to get her younger son, Wesley, married off. With the help of Miss Addie, the local matchmaker, she had chosen a wonderful bride for Russell, even if the girl was hiding some things. For some reason Naomi was ashamed of her upbringing, fabricating a lie about her past. Catherine knew she wasn't from upper crust. She knew because she herself had been brought up in that world and there was no way Naomi had been.

For the next few days Naomi remained at her side, not once leaving the house to go home. Even when the doctor gave the okay for Catherine to get up and about, Naomi still insisted on staying.

And each day, Russell or Wesley would lift her up, carefully placing her on the settee or at the table. They even allowed her to sit outside. Yet, Naomi still insisted on staying. Wesley was here and there was no need for the young lady to stay overnight any more since the worst was over.

Wanting to push things along, Catherine asked Nora to send for the doctor again. It was time Naomi went home to

her husband. When the doc and Nurse Ellie showed up later in the day, he agreed to release her to a walking stick as long as she elevated her leg morning and at night. Relief plunged through Catherine as she watched Naomi leave to go back home. Of course, Russell was there earlier demanding she go home, too. They hadn't known she overheard.

Finally, she was alone. Wesley had gone next door to the White ranch to play cards with the other men. Catherine sat alone on the porch, the wooden cane tucked in a spot beside her. The boys had insisted she keep it with her at all times and not walk without it.

Jeremiah stopped by to make sure she didn't need anything. "I'm fine, young man. If you go inside, there is some leftover apple pie. Get yourself a slice to take on home."

The boy didn't hesitate. Catherine had to laugh. He was almost sixteen and so shy. He hardly ever left the barn where he helped to take care of the horses. He lived behind the stables in a small cabin and didn't come out much. After his father had died, leaving him alone, he mostly kept to himself.

Jeremiah thanked her and was gone in the blink of an eye. For the past week she had tried to push thoughts of Cooper from her mind. It was almost impossible. Even when the house was so busy, she hadn't been able to stop herself thinking about him. It was worse now since there was nothing distracting her.

He hadn't bothered to come visit, either. She hadn't been to church in two weeks. Had he even noticed she wasn't there?

In a way she didn't blame him after what had transpired. She guessed he took her last words seriously. Although, she had honestly thought when he heard about her accident he'd at least stop in as her pastor to make sure she didn't need any spiritual comfort.

Then she shook her head. What kind of pastor was he?

Sadness washed over Catherine. She had been right when she'd told him his true colors were showing. He'd rather be kissing a member of his congregation than checking to make sure she was okay. She wondered who he was kissing on now?

The harsh reality slapped Catherine square in the face.

She was alone in the world and that's the way it was going to be. She may as well accept the fact he didn't want her or he'd be there. When he looked at her, did he see what she saw, a woman past her prime? Way past, she mused.

Right now, this very moment, she realized she had no one to share her later years with. During all those years spent watching her sons grow and working the farm, she never gave much thought to growing old.

Now, it was closing in on her.

Nor did she want a man who loved on other women in front of God and everyone.

Was Catherine destined to be alone?

All of her realizations cause her gut to hurt as she thought about a life without love.

She stood staring out over her farm, at the the land she had

owned along with her husband who had died so many years ago. She'd come a long way since then, even after the tragedy that had produced her twin sons.

She had forgiven Nora White's husband for forcing her in that way because her sons meant the world to her. They had been a gift from God then. Still were. If she had to live the rest of her life alone, then, so be it. At least she knew she was strong enough to withstand anything put in front of her, even the antics of Cooper Murphy, who claimed to be a man of the cloth.

He was found kissing someone else and didn't care who knew it! She guessed that was what hurt her the most. Perhaps it was wrong to assume he had cared about her. If she were to be honest, he had never claimed anything more than a friendship.

Was she a fool to have gotten so riled up, shoving the basket of food in his arms and turning away? Had she made a spectacle of herself? Blood rushed to her cheeks when she realized he may not have thought any more of her than making sure the widow from his congregation was looked after.

Catherine hobbled the distance to her husband's grave, set in a small fenced in area on a slight hill. She opened and closed the cast iron gate, leaning on the cane as she stared at the flat stone engraved with his initials.

It had been a long row to hoe, living life without him. She barely recalled what he looked like. She was older and wiser

now, realizing he had had a choice not to go out in the thunderstorm that day. He did anyway, believing nothing could stop him. He hadn't realized a higher power decides when.

She looked up to the clouds, knowing God was able to see her even if she didn't see any sign of him. Dare she ask for someone to love her?

Chapter 2

“Cooper! I can do this myself. Why don’t you go on out of here and let me finish?” Tom Hamilton took the hammer from Cooper’s hand and let it swing back and forth in his fist. “I mean it. Go do whatever it is a preacher does.”

Cooper bent over, taking in deep gulps of air. He rested the palms of his hands on his knees for a brief moment until he was able to catch his breath. “I need something to keep me busy.” It was true. Ever since Catherine Young had stood in the doorway of the church he had been on edge, a constant nerve twitching at his neck. He knew he had snapped at several undeserving people this past week and a half and seemed to be apologizing to everyone.

God, give me the strength I need. Ever since he had changed his life around and became ordained, it seemed as if life had been even harder. Why was that?

He built this town for both men like himself and others to find some respite from the harsh elements and temptations of life. This had been his calling and so far it seemed to be working for everyone else except him. How was that fair? He wanted to shake a fist at the heavens some days even though he taught his congregation to be grateful and forgiving.

Did that make him a hypocrite? Nah, it made him human. Everyone messed up and made mistakes. His purpose now in life was to right those wrongs and help others to do the same.

To live his life according to God's laws first and man's law next. It hadn't always been that way.

"Cooper. Are you listening?"

"I'm sorry, Tom." He shook his head. He hadn't listened to anyone since she had run off that day. His head seemed to be stuck in the clouds lately. Only half listening to conversations and people looking at him strangely were two of the problems that had been occurring since Catherine's rebuff and retreat.

He sighed and rubbed a hand over the two day old stub across his chin when Tom started at him again.

"You're doing more harm here than good, Cooper. Go on and write a sermon or something."

Cooper glared at his friend. They had known each other for years. When Cooper began building the town, Tom was the first man to not only encourage him but to jump in and help. He owed his friend. It was why he found himself on the roof of the livery, trying to help patch up the leaks. Except he kept making a mess of things.

"You are probably right, man." Cooper handed over the hammer. "My head has been full of nonsense lately."

Tom stared. "Woman nonsense? You still whining about Widow Young? Why don't you go on over there and tell her how you feel?"

Cooper shrugged. "I doubt she wants to see me, Tom. She made it clear how she felt the day she left here. She thinks I was kissing Cynthia Anderson."

Tom's eyes widened. "Say what? Now, I've known you for

over ten years, maybe fifteen and I know for a fact that the Anderson woman is not your type. What kind of mess did you get in to now, Coop?”

Cooper rubbed the palm of his hand over his eyes. “Cynthia Anderson stopped by the church wanting me to pray with her and I wanted to oblige. If only I had paid attention to the signs. They were all there every single week in church.”

Tom grinned. “Signs? She sounds like more my style of woman. What did she do, jump your bones?”

“I guess you could call it something like that. We stood in the church between the rows of pews and I reached out to place both her hands in mine to pray with her. Instead, she wrapped her arms around my neck and laid a kiss on me like nobody’s business. I placed my hands around her waist to push her back and-”

“Don’t tell me, Misses Young flung open the doors of the church and there you were in all God’s glory, kissing a promiscuous woman.” Tom burst out in a big guffaw, his large frame shaking from head to toe. He slapped Cooper on the back. “You are in some deep stuff there, son.”

“It’s not one bit funny, Tom.” Cooper liked his friend. They had helped each other over the years, even kept the other from breaking the law at times. But this, the laughter, was making Cooper angry. It also made him feel like a fool. He thought a lot of Catherine Young.

“Yes, it is funny. There you are, the founder of this town, pastor of the church, and you are the only person I know who

can't tell a woman how you feel about her. You've been rhapsodizing on her ever since she started attending your services. When did you plan to pursue her?"

Cooper shrugged. "I wasn't. I mean, I went to visit her at her farm, but it was always official pastoral business. I guess I did mention a time or two that I enjoyed being with her."

"Oh brother! Come on, son, let's go to the café that opened up last week for a cup of coffee. We need to talk about things."

"I doubt you want to hear about my personal '*things*' as you call them."

Tom was already half-way down the ladder. "Yes, I do want to hear this. It's going to keep me entertained for the next month of Sundays." His bold laughter rang in Cooper's ears as they made their way to the new café.

The small eatery was sandwiched between the boarding house and mercantile. Last month Cooper had sold the small building to another one of his associates who had turned from bank robber to store owner. The man had spent ten years in a jail cell for his crimes and found the Lord halfway through his sentence. When he got out no one would give him a chance to redeem himself except for Cooper.

Most men went back to what they knew best, especially when polite society did not welcome them with an open mind. Cooper had ridden a hard line with the worst of men for years after the war. He had also worn a badge for some time, working on the right side of the law. Later, he had

become a bounty hunter, looking for the men who were not redeemable.

When he came close to murdering one of the men in cold blood, Cooper realized he had to change his life. He was becoming like the men he hunted and didn't like what he saw in the mirror.

He went home then to collect himself. His father was a man of the cloth and welcomed Cooper with open arms. He studied under his father for three years while trying to change his ways. He knew it was the right thing to do and became ordained. His father had told him not to just pray for people but to make a difference in this world. He had said to start with what Cooper knew best.

When he bought this land, he vowed to God to help others who wanted to change their lives but were never given the chance. He grunted when he remembered thinking of naming the town Second Chances but had instead called it Cooper's Ridge since it was tucked into a ridge. Was he vain for naming the town after himself?

"There you are again, your mind's in la la land." Tom's voice interrupted his thoughts.

"Was thinking about Charlie, actually. He's doing good for himself." The owner of the café had cleaned up his act and was looking like a fine businessman. No one would ever know he had been in a state penitentiary a month ago. He had an apron tied around his waist over a pair of tailored slacks, a long sleeved shirt and tie. It was out of place in a small

eatery, but if Charlie wanted to appear that way who was Cooper to tell him differently.

“Pastor Murphy!” Charlie himself brought two cups of coffee over to their table. He smiled from ear to ear. “Glad to see you here again. What can I get the two of you?”

“Just coffee for now, Charlie. Looks like business is booming.” The tables were filled except for one or two.

“Sure is.” He leaned in and whispered, “Except for that old Mrs. Winters. Looks like I’m going to have to hire me someone younger and brighter. She is slow as molasses and keeps chasing people out the door as soon as they are done eating!”

Cooper shook his head. He had wondered if the older woman was going to work out. She had needed a job since her husband’s death a few months ago, but she wasn’t a pleasant one. “I tell you what, Charlie, I’ll see if Millie can use some help at the saloon. She was talking about slowing down since her leg’s been bothering her.”

Relief surged through Charlie. Cooper watched as he went from frustrated to hopeful. “I better get back. She needs to get off her -”

Cooper held up a hand. “Okay, Charlie, I get the picture.”

Tom guffawed. His deep voice had others looking their way. “You’re always trying to fix everyone, Coop.”

“It’s my duty to do so. I made a promise to God, and I intend to keep that vow.”

Tom leaned in. “That’s all well and good, son, but you have

to keep the promise you made to yourself, too.”

Cooper frowned.

“You know what I’m talking about. Your promise to become the best man you can be. You can’t be doing that if you’re minding other people’s business and not taking care of yourself, now can you?”

He hated when Tom was right. The man knew him too well. “I guess you are right once again, old friend.”

“We have come a long way, haven’t we? Look at you. When we met we were wearing gray, fighting a war we were determined to win against all odds. It was only a matter of time before the Yanks won. But we fought diligently and bravely. We walked away with our heads up, proud men even if we lost. It messed up a lot of good soldiers, son. You and me, we made it through in one piece. I’d say the man you work for saw us both through a long, hard road.”

Tom always had a way of putting everything in perspective. “It doesn’t seem all that long ago, does it?”

Tom shifted in his seat. “I remember it like yesterday. So, why are you waiting around, Coop? There is a woman out there who seems to enjoy your company and I don’t mean the Anderson lady. God gave you a second chance, not once but twice. What are you doing? It’s like spitting in his face when you don’t reach out and grab all his gifts.”

Cooper sat back, stunned. “Maybe you should become a preacher, Tom. That was a mighty strong speech.”

Tom grinned. Then he laughed out loud, his deep voice

resonating off of the cafes's walls. "God don't need me in that job. He needs you and a fine woman by your side. I'd say it's time you started paying attention."

"She hates me."

"Even if she was madder than a snake, she don't hate you. Those are emotions from someone who has a fire in their belly. You best go find that woman and let her know how you feel before someone else catches her attention. If a woman reacted that strongly to me, you better believe I'd be taking that woman to the altar."

Cooper had to laugh because Tom may be a redeemed man but he loved the attention of the ladies. He was always flirting with one or another. He didn't see Tom settling down any time soon. "It won't hurt to try. She hasn't been at church the past two weeks."

"What are you waiting for? Go on. I have to get back on the roof and I don't want your help, no offense."

Cooper nodded. "I'll be saddling up Uriel, then. May as well at least give it a try."

Tom stood and slapped him on the shoulder. "Don't try, son. Go get your woman."

Cooper shook his head. "You make it sound so easy. Wait until you're in this position, Tom. I'll be giving you the same advice."

Tom didn't look back. "I doubt I ever will be. Don't need a woman. Never have, never will."

"Famous last words," Cooper mumbled to himself. He

gulped down his coffee, throwing a few coins on the table when one of the first residents of Cooper's Ridge walked by.

"Pastor Cooper," the man called out. "Can I talk to you for a minute?"

"Sure. Have a seat." Cooper held out his hand to shake, offering the man a seat at the table.

Ralph Grimm had been the first man to lease a house in town. He was a hard worker, offering his skills as a land surveyor to many businesses and towns in the area. He had worked for the railroad for years until they didn't need him any longer. After the two sets of tracks met in Promontory, his service to the Union Pacific was over. The man had wandered for a few years working small jobs until Cooper met up with him in Dallas and invited him here to settle down. He had helped Cooper to platte out the land and showed him how to do the paperwork.

"I'm surprised to see you, Ralph. I thought you were working on a project out of town?"

The older man nodded. "I had been away for some time. Jeez, Pastor, I've been back for over a week and a half. Greeted you every morning since."

"I haven't been myself lately, Ralph. Guess I have more on my mind than usual."

"Sorry to hear that." He flexed his arm, holding onto his shoulder longer than necessary.

"Did you hurt yourself?"

Ralph nodded. "It's an old injury, hoping it heals soon."

That's what I wanted to ask you about. Do you think we're ever going to have a doctor in town? For now we got to ride all the way to Wichita Falls to see a doc. I'm not getting any younger, you know."

Cooper was surprised to hear him say such a thing. The man was always on the go, traveling from one area to the next. "I hadn't thought much about a doctor, but I guess you're right. We'll get the committee together next Monday and see if we can't do something about that situation. Have you gone to see Doc James over in Wichita Falls yet?"

He shook his head. "Nope. Been staying close by here ever since my accident the other week. Guess I'm getting too old. Why, I thought I killed that lady in the buggy at first."

The hairs on Cooper's arms stood straight up as a feeling of dread came over him. He asked in a calm voice. "What lady?"

"The one that always comes here from the farm. As a matter of fact, I haven't seen her lately. I hope she is all right."

Copper stood up, glaring down at the old man. "What happened, Ralph."

The man's eyes bugged out. He held up his hand. "I swear I didn't do anything wrong. I was coming around the turn right before the ridge and the buggy was flying around the corner so fast I barely had time to get out of the way. Her horse reared up and that light-weighted buggy flipped right over. The woman, why, she went flying through the air like a bullet from a six-shooter."

Cooper didn't wait for any more explanation. He checked his pistol before saddling up Uriel and left town before anyone was able to ask why the pastor was leaving in such a hurry. His jaws were clenched together, his fingers wrapped around the reins so tightly he was making his horse nervous.

He had to calm down. What if she was seriously injured? Falling from a buggy at a high rate of speed was enough to render someone lifeless. Was that why she hadn't been to church in over two weeks? Rationality ceased to exist as Cooper pushed his steed faster down the road towards the farm.

As a pastor he had to encourage people to have faith, to lay their fears out to the Lord and give them to him to diminish. As a man, the worst scenario popped into his head. He blamed himself. If he hadn't hesitated for a split second, Catherine would never have seen that woman with her arms wrapped around him. He had felt sorry for the Anderson woman, and even though he had no intentions of kissing her, he hadn't pushed her away right away.

Dear Lord, had he caused Catherine's demise? She would never have been on that road when Ralph came around the turn if he hadn't been holding another woman in his arms. She had been coming to see him; the picnic basket of food left behind on the floor was proof of her intentions.

Anger rode Cooper as he made his way past the cut off to the White Ranch. He was almost there. He slowed when a buggy pulled onto the road from the track to the farm.

Uriel came to a slow walk. Russell and his new wife were loaded in the buggy along with Wesley. He didn't see Widow Young. A gut-wrenching fear rolled over him. He was afraid he would be unable to get any words out. How could he call himself a man of God when he showed fear like a man who wasn't able to trust his own father?

"Pastor Cooper!"

He nodded. The three of them didn't look sad or upset at all. There was no time to waste. He needed to know if she was all right. "Russell. Naomi. Wesley. Where is your mother?"

Russell shook his head. "She's done kicked us all out."

At her son's words, a surge of relief surged through him. She was alive, at least! "Oh?"

Naomi laughed. "We are going to the festival in Wichita Falls. Well, we weren't going to go, but she insisted and refused to take no for an answer. Jeremiah, the boy who runs the stable, is there in case she needs anything."

Wesley tilted his head. "We're surprised you haven't been here sooner."

"I didn't know." Three words he managed to get out. What was wrong with him? His throat was restricted, his heart pumping as if it were going to explode right inside his chest. Cooper ached to speed down the drive to find her but knew it wasn't in his best interest to be so bold. At least he found relief in knowing she wasn't dead.

"We did want to send for you, but Ma didn't want any

visitors. She was pretty explicit about that order. I'm sure she will be glad to see you now that she is getting around much better." The brothers waved as their buggy continued down the road.

Cooper sat there, stunned at Wesley's last statement. She hadn't wanted any visitors. That meant him for certain. He had to see for himself that she was okay.

He prompted the horse, moving at a steady pace down the road towards the farm. The two-story building sat against the landscape, its large windows and huge front porch looking like it always had, neat and clean. She kept her farm in immaculate shape. The landscape around the buildings was always cleared of weeds. Small flowers were planted in containers along the steps.

The stable boy came across the yard holding a shotgun against his right flank. Cooper nodded. "Hello, son."

"Pastor. I'll take your horse."

"That's Uriel. I've run her pretty hard."

"I'll take good care of her. Do you plan to be here for awhile, Pastor Murphy?"

That was a good question, but one he wasn't able to answer. "Not sure yet, son. I'm hoping so."

Jeremiah nodded. "Either way, she's in good hands."

Cooper had no doubt. The young man was an expert when it came to handling horses. He watched, surprised, as Uriel went cooperatively along with Jeremiah. Then he took the steps two at a time and knocked on the door.

After five minutes spent continuously knocking, Cooper wondered if he was being ignored. He really couldn't blame her, but he wasn't leaving until he was allowed to apologize for his behavior. Even though it hadn't been entirely his fault, he was going to be the bigger person and take the blame for the kissing episode.

That was if the widow would see him. Considering her response to his knocking, he wasn't going to be given the chance.

Chapter 3

Catherine wasn't sure why she was sitting at her dead husband's grave. She hadn't visited it for years when the boys were growing up except to pull weeds and keep the grass from taking over. Of all the places on the farm, this area was the most quiet and secluded, a place to contemplate. She had placed a bench made from several old pieces of wood in front of his stone, allowing her to sit and think.

The open range stood before her, the house and barn off to the side. She had chosen this small area for a cemetery as it was a place where one was able to look out over the land and see the possibilities here, even though there was so much sorrow right in front of her. She'd be here someday, too, and knew this place was a haven for those who grieved. Catherine wanted her boys to know why she had chosen this patch of land as a place of burial. Life went on even in the midst of death, and she wanted them to be able to see that.

When she came here it wasn't always to visit his grave but to embrace the life she had chosen for herself and the boys. Had she ever thought about going back to California? In the first few years she had many times. Even when her husband first brought Catherine here she wanted to turn and run back home. Life had been hard getting a farm started, but they had done well for themselves. Mother Nature had other ideas, making life tough at times. But, she had been happy for most

of their marriage.

Sometimes she wasn't sure why she hadn't packed up and went back to San Francisco after his death. Except, she'd never forget the day she left home. Her father had hovered at the front door as she was putting her things in the carriage, gazing at her with sorrow. "You've made your bed, now you must lie in it." When he closed the door, she knew it was final. She'd never be allowed to return.

She was brought up in a well-to-do family, her father from old money. They had lived well in the prominent area of San Francisco. Her father had planned for her marriage to a family friend's son, but she had met her husband in the meantime. He had been an adventurer, filled with ideas of mining for gold and making his fortune. She didn't ever want her family to know she had made a mistake, that they hadn't done well and prospered. Instead, he had made a little bit of money prospecting. Enough to buy them this land and build a farm. They had worked hard in the first few years to build what she had now.

She had written her mother and father years later about how she was raising two boys alone. They never once sent a letter in return or came to visit. They spent a lifetime holding her choice of man against her, that she had fallen in love with instead of falling in with their plan for an arranged marriage.

She had chosen the right man. Even if life had been harsh and bad things had happened, Catherine had a good family. She was content. "I've been angry with you for years for

leaving me,” she told the headstone. A tear fell from her face. “You promised us forever. Then you went out into a storm. Your death was preventable, but you wouldn’t listen to the warning signs.”

She swiped at the fallen tear, pushing it away. “I’ve forgiven you. Now, I want to tell you that I’m ready to move on, to find someone to make me happy again. My boys are grown men; one is married. You’d like them. I’m so proud of the responsible men they have become. We’ve been through hell and back and there again, but we all stick together. We made the best of our situation. I truly wish you had been their father. I’ve told you the story many times before and here I am again, talking to you as if you can hear me.”

Catherine’s leg ached. She had been foolish to walk so far the first time she was left alone. What if it gave out on her? It still throbbed at times, but it was healing nicely. At least she had a wooden cane to help. She’d sit here a little longer to make sure she didn’t do any damage. Besides, it was peaceful and wouldn’t be dark for hours. If Jeremiah came to the house, which was unlikely, he might come out and help her. Of course, her sons would probably give her a scolding for walking so far.

“I thought I had found someone,” she told the gravestone. “He is charming and sweet and kind; all of the things I want in a man. You’d be glad to know he is a true man of God. Well, at least I thought he was. Turns out he loves all the ladies. In more ways than I can explain.”

She shook her head. Was she destined to be alone?

“Catherine.”

The low, raspy voice was familiar. Too familiar. Afraid to turn her head, she stared down at the stone, concentrating on the initials. “Pastor Murphy.”

He didn’t say anything for the longest time. She waited for him to speak. When he didn’t, she turned to see him standing there, his hands shoved deeply into his pockets, his face solemn with eyes looking at her as if she were the only woman in the world for him.

Except he had done the same thing to the Anderson woman a few weeks ago. She closed her eyes. “I won’t be fooled into thinking you have come here for other than for a pastoral visit.”

“I didn’t know,” he choked out, letting out a deep breath as if he were afraid to speak. Catherine had never seen him so distraught. Cooper was usually calm and collected.

Despite the circumstances of his betrayal, she decided to be kind instead of hurling the thoughts that had formed in the back of her mind. In all honesty, he didn’t owe her an explanation. He had never claimed to be anything more than her pastor. “What didn’t you know?”

He took a step forward. “That you were in an accident. Ralph Grimm told me only an hour ago what happened. I didn’t know.”

She watched him, reading the truth in those dark eyes. “Had you known, would you have come out and prayed for

me?”

He shook his head, taking a hesitant step forward as if she were a cornered animal that he didn't want to scare off. Catherine stood. She wanted to back away from him but had nowhere to go. She sat back down on the bench, her trembling legs ready to give out. He was getting too close. She wasn't going to fall for his charm. Not like Miss Anderson had done.

When she sat down, he was instantly in front of her, bending on one knee, taking her hand in his. “If I had known, I'd have come right away. Believe me, you mean the world to me. Not as part of a congregation, no, but as a woman. Please, believe me when I say that no matter what you think you saw, it wasn't the truth. Miss Anderson asked me to pray for her and I took both her hands to pray, like I do with everyone.”

That part was true. He was a gentle, caring man most times. He'd reached out to many of his congregation, women, men and children alike. Yet, how did he explain what she saw with her own eyes? “I saw the kiss. It's not a kiss a pastor gives.”

“Catherine, when I reached for her hands, she wrapped her arms around me instead and kissed me like nobody's business. It took me completely by surprise. I'll admit as a man of God my job was to turn away. I hesitated for a moment and it cost me something I hold dear.”

Her brow rose. “I can see God is angry with you. You need

to get back in his good graces.”

He smiled. “Not God. He knows the truth, Catherine. It cost me you.”

“Me?” She swallowed. Was she blushing? She lowered her eyes, unable to look at him.

He let go of her hand and lifted her chin. “I care about you very much.”

“Say that again,” she whispered.

He bent his head closer. His warm breath fluttered against her cheek as his low voice hummed softly against her ear. “I care about you very much.”

Catherine had to be careful. Did she believe him? Or, was he the devil in disguise?

“I don’t know what to believe,” she told him honestly, taking in his closeness. He was still on his knee, his mouth so close to her ear.

“Let me show you instead,” he told her and moved before she was able to turn away. His mouth covered hers in a sweet, soft kiss that lingered on longer than was proper. He released her slowly, dropping soft kisses against her mouth, trailing across her cheek before letting her go. He stood up, taking a step back, almost falling over the stone of her husband’s grave. He caught himself before tumbling to the ground.

Catherine giggled.

He grinned. “I guess I deserved that.”

Cooper was one of the most handsome men she had ever

met. He had kissed her, the exact thing she hadn't wanted him to do. How was she supposed to believe him after a kiss like that?

"I can see in your eyes you aren't sure about me, Catherine."

She nodded, tilting her head to one side. "I want to be courted."

His eyes twinkled. "Courtied?"

"Why not? I've never been."

The pastor looked at her husband's gravestone. "What about him? Didn't he court you?"

"Not really. I'll be honest, we had to sneak around my parents. They wanted me to marry someone of my station. My husband and I would meet at the park and before long we were married and off on our adventure."

"You deserve to be courted."

Catherine stood, picking up her walking stick and leaning against it for support. "Let's go back to the house; it will be more appropriate. We can sit on the porch if you'd like."

He kept pace with her, going slowly as she limped along. "If courting you is what it takes to make you see there is no other woman I want, Catherine, then I will court you like no man has courted a woman before."

She smiled, taking his arm when he held it out. "I realize I am of a certain age -"

He leaned over and kissed her cheek, taking her by surprise. "Age makes no difference. You are beautiful."

“You are a charmer,” she teased. “But, don’t stop. Cooper, I’m sorry I misjudged you.”

“It’s understandable. I’m sure if I walked into a room and you were in another man’s arms, well, he’d probably be dead or close to it.”

Catherine stopped walking. “You can’t possibly feel that strongly about me, and those words coming from a pastor are not acceptable.”

Cooper ran a hand over his brow. “I’m still a bit on the rough side, Catherine. I don’t know if that will ever change. I may be a pastor, but I’m human, too. There’s no reason to believe I’m holier than thou because it isn’t true. My congregation understands this as well. It’s why I’ve captured the hearts of many men who wanted to change their lives around but didn’t want to be judged.”

“I understand, Cooper. You are a good man to many people.”

“I want to be a good man to you as well,” he told her.

“I’d like to take this slowly, Cooper. If you don’t mind?” Except she hoped he’d continue to give her a taste of those kisses now and again. He was indeed a handsome fellow and had the tastiest lips she had ever been kissed by. She didn’t think it was proper to tell him those thoughts.

“I’ve promised to court you, Miss Young, and I’ll start right now. Wait here.” He turned and ran towards a small field of bluebells. Reaching down, Catherine watched with glee as, reaching down, he picked some of the largest flowers. When

he had a bunch in his fist, he hurried back. Out of breath he presented them to her. “Lovely flowers for a lovely lady.”

Catherine took them and blushed. “Thank you. Now let’s go get some lemonade. I’ve a pitcher in my kitchen.”

Cooper grinned. Then he swooped her up, the cane dangling from her hand. “No lady in your condition should have to walk so far,” he told her, a big grin on his face. He strode towards the house, depositing her on a rocker on the front porch. “If I have your permission to go inside, I’ll fetch the drinks.”

Catherine was so endeared she could only nod. Was he going to be doing sweet and silly things like this during their courtship? If so, she was going to relish the attention. No one had ever been quite so bold with her, ever. Not even her husband, rest his soul. Patrick had been so busy trying to do everything, he rarely had time for her. She had realized that after their first year of marriage, but the drive to build the farm kept her from thinking about romance.

Cooper made her feel as if she were worthy of his attention.

“Here we are,” he said, pushing open the screen door with his hip. He held a glass in each hand, handing one to her and sitting on the bench beside the rocker.

“Thank you, Cooper.”

He nodded, sipping on the drink. For five minutes straight no words were said as Catherine rocked back and forth, the only sound from the rocker as it connected with the porch. He finished his glass and set it down beside him on the bench. “I

probably should get back. I high-tailed it out of town so fast no one knows where I'm at. I suspect in a few more hours a search party will be looking for me."

She hated for him to leave, but the sun was starting to fade. If he stayed much longer it would become dangerous to travel in the dark. She turned to face him. "I'm glad you came, Cooper. I had died a little inside thinking of you as a scoundrel."

When she rose, he got up, taking her two hands. They faced each other. "I am not a scoundrel," he insisted, "and I'll prove it to you. My goal now is to make you see that we are meant for each other. I certainly don't deserve a fine woman like you."

Was she endeared to him or to the fact no other man had ever taken an interest in her? Was that why his words melted her heart? "I'm so confused, and at my age, I should not be. I should know what I want and not waste any time. I wish I hadn't come to the church that day."

"Catherine, don't torture yourself. It happened. Let's move on from there."

"That's easy for you to say. You didn't see what I did. I'll be honest. I misjudged you. I'm well aware of Miss Anderson's tactics. The whole town is and I didn't even consider it when I ran off like I did."

"Don't -"

"I'm sorry. It's going to take me awhile to get over this. What if I am the one who can't ever trust a man? How is that

fair to you, Cooper? You will always have women falling at your feet.”

His brow rose and he grinned. “Are you saying you are a bit jealous that women like me?”

“Maybe a bit.”

“I want to say jealousy is a sin.” He pulled her close. “But, I’m kind of feeling like your vulnerability makes me want to kiss you and reassure you that you are the only one for me.” He dipped his head, not asking for permission and pressed his mouth over hers. Catherine kissed him back, knowing they should stop and yet her heart told her to embrace his kisses.

When he pulled away, Cooper leaned his forehead against hers. “I best get going.” He gave her a quick kiss on the tip of her nose and brushed a hand across her cheek. “I’ll see you soon, Catherine.”

She watched him as he went to the stables, looking more like an outlaw than a preacher, her hand still over her mouth. His kisses rendered her silent. She grinned. If he wanted to keep her quiet, he’d have to make sure she was thoroughly kissed each time they were together. It wasn’t long until he rode past, his dark eyes watching her as he tipped his hat. “Good night, Catherine.”

She stood on the porch until her leg almost gave out, forcing her inside. The kids were going to stay in Wichita Falls at the hotel overnight so she doused the lights and made her way to her bedroom.

Catherine sat in the rocker by the window for the longest

time, staring out at the night sky. She was ready to move on from here. All she had ever wanted in life was to see her two boys, now men, marry and find happiness. Russell had that with Naomi.

Nora would stop by tomorrow to ask about her evening visitor, she was almost sure. She'd make it a point to discuss Wesley finding a mail order bride. It was time. Now that Russell and Naomi were settled in the new cabin, she was going to encourage Wesley to start building one. Unless, he wanted the house. Since she would marry Cooper someday, of that she was certain, perhaps she'd offer the house to Wesley.

The next morning, bright and early, Nora was knocking on the front door. Catherine handed her a cup of coffee the moment she walked in. "I had a feeling you would be here early," she told her, laughing at the face her friend made.

"Don't be silly, Catherine. I saw the pastor leaving last night. It was almost dark when he rode out of here. What do you have to tell me?"

Catherine blushed. "Sit down." The two were like old friends, especially since they'd been through so much. "Can you believe at one time we hated each other?"

Nora smiled. "Hmm, it seems like so long ago, and yet it has only been a short time. Now, I feel as if you are the sister I'd never had."

Her words almost brought a tear to Catherine's eye. "Thank you, I feel the same."

Nora was always one to get straight to the point. "So, how

did your reunion go?”

“How do you know it was a reunion?”

“Because I didn’t hear a shotgun blast off and a horse and rider galloping away from your farm.”

Catherine laughed out loud. “You’re right. He explained what happened. I should’ve known all along it was that Jezebel who went after him.”

“I told you so.” Nora wasn’t trying to make herself sound superior. She was just stating fact.

“You were right. I didn’t want to believe him at first but realized soon after he was being honest. I think I’m in love, Nora, and it scares the daylight out of me.”

Nora gave her a hug. “Oh, honey, don’t be afraid of love.”

Catherine took a sip of coffee. “I know this is a final chance for me to find some happiness. Trust me, I’m not getting any younger. I mean there aren’t all that many fine men around. Not someone who would want me. I told him I want to be courted.”

Nora sat back. “What in the world for? You need to grab that man and make yourself happy, Catherine. You may be dead tomorrow!”

The seriousness of Nora’s tone made Catherine giggle. “Oh, Nora, he’s not going anywhere that soon. Neither am I.”

Nora shrugged. “You never know. I found happiness with Rusty, a man I’ve known all my life. He was right in front of me the whole time. Don’t be foolish and waste any more time, Catherine.”

“I know, it’s just men have not been good for me in the past.”

“Forget the past. Your husband is long dead and gone. He wasn’t able to help that. When it is our time, we go, gone. Dead. Don’t be thinking he deliberately died to make your life harder because that isn’t how it works. Now, my husband, that was different. He made both of us miserable for years, but that’s another story. If you think Pastor Murphy is going to hurt you, then don’t see him any more.”

“Oh, Nora, such harsh words. The thought of not seeing him again is heart breaking. I’m so hesitant to move forward though. It’s not entirely his fault; it’s mine.”

“You have to learn to trust.”

“How do you do that?”

Nora sighed and patted Catherine’s hand. “Time, my dear. Time.”

“That’s why I want to be courted. I have to learn to trust again.”

Nora’s eyes lit up. “Meanwhile, I do believe we have one more son to marry off. Shall we spend some time planning a bride for Wesley?”

It took Catherine’s mind off of things, and when Wesley came in later, he found his mother and Nora planning a visit to Wichita Falls to see Miss Addie. Wesley wasn’t too happy, but he wouldn’t disappoint her she knew and felt terrible for taking advantage of that fact. Knowing him, he’d never take this step. She was glad to have Nora’s help in this area.

At least the planning of her son's mail order bride took her mind off of her own love life.

Except every now and again she wondered how Cooper was.

Chapter 4

Cooper scratched his head. "Women are confusing, Tom. Catherine said she wants to be courted. Courtship implies things are about to get serious between the two of us."

"Well, I don't see a problem here, son." Tom was riding with him to Wichita Falls.

"The problem is she refused to allow me to ask either of her sons for permission to court her."

"Do it anyway. According to Mrs. Smithton, that elderly woman we visited, she said it is proper for the suitor to ask permission."

Cooper shook his head. "I was over the other afternoon for a visit, like I have every Wednesday afternoon since we decided to give it a shot. Been almost a month of Wednesdays and I'm no better off than I was before. I took a big bunch of flowers and asked her to go for a walk out on the farm. She was inside with Nora White, aprons on and baking away at the stove. Didn't even ask me to come in. She opened the door a tiny inch and told me she was busy preparing for her son's wedding reception. Told me to come back on Friday evening and she'd explain everything. Then she reminded me she was going to need me Saturday afternoon during the reception to say a few words to the new bride and groom."

Tom pushed back his wide-brimmed hat and scratched his

head. "I guess you don't know how to court somebody proper is all that's going on."

"That's why we are going to go to that fancy hotel of Ben Sloan's in Wichita Falls. His wife Lily has a library there with all kinds of books on the proper etiquette of courting a woman. I'm going to sit there all day if I have to and learn something. Same with you, Tom. I can't read it all so you'll have to help me."

Tom grumbled. "I thought for sure I was going to go have a visit at the saloon while you were doing your business."

Cooper grinned. "Not this time. Not today. You owe me one, son."

"Your southern charm is coming out, Cooper."

They rode for over an hour until the outskirts of Wichita Falls came into view. Cooper thought he was impressing Catherine the first few times he went to see her. Seated on the porch, they'd chatted for over an hour. But this last time, the way she almost threw him off the property, had him puzzled. She wasn't a rude person. As a matter of fact, Catherine was one of the sweetest women he knew. It was one of the reasons he was in love with her.

He wasn't going to lose her, either. Not over improper courtship rules. He'd find every single book in that library and stay there for a week if need be. Although he doubted Tom would stick around that long.

At the hotel, Cooper explained his situation to Ben's wife, Lily. She gave him an understanding smile and set him up in

a wing-backed chair with a pile of books on his lap.

“Now, Pastor Murphy, you don’t have to read every single book. Take a look at the table of contents and read only what applies. I’d let you borrow a few, but I’ve had trouble getting my books back in one piece. These instructional books especially seem to never return.”

“Not a problem, Mrs. Sloan. I’m sure between Tom and myself, we can cover what we need to know in an afternoon.”

The look on Mrs. Sloan’s face told him he may be wrong. Cooper gritted his teeth. He’d best get reading.

After awhile, he heard Tom grunt a few times. When Cooper looked up he saw Tom nodding. Curious, he closed the pages of his own book. “What’s got you so enthralled there, Tom?”

Tom held up *Castle’s Handbook of Etiquette*. “Listen to this. It says that you should be ready to act the knight, if a lady in your company is attacked or distressed.”

“Tom! My lady hasn’t been attacked! That’s nonsense. Of course I’d be her knight if that were the case.” He’d never let any harm come to Catherine.

Tom glanced at him as if he didn’t know what he was talking about. “I’m just saying, Coop. What if she was being threatened? You can come to her rescue. Any woman would die for a chance to have someone become her knight in shining armor.” He winked at Cooper. “You can make this happen. ”

“Tom! I hope you are kidding! I’m not going to set her up.

No.” He didn’t really think that was a good idea, did he? Cooper shook his head, turning back to his book. “Find something else, Tom.”

Tom whistled a few times, drawing the attention of a few others in the room. Lily came back to make sure the two were comfortable. “We do have rooms available if you need more time,” she told them.

“I think we’ll be fine, Mrs. Sloan. Thank you.”

The woman turned when she heard her husband call out to her. Cooper watched as she ran into his arms. He wrapped her into his embrace and kissed her as if they didn’t have guests all over their hotel.

“Now that’s love,” Tom murmured, watching the two.

Cooper had to agree. They looked to be head over heels in love. Even after several years it amazed him each time he came to town. The two behaved as if they had been married only yesterday. Cooper went back to his reading, pausing as he came across an interesting paragraph.

“Tom, listen to this, *At this period it is a wise man who makes a friend of a girl’s mother, and if he does this he will generally be repaid in a twofold manner. No matter how willful a girl may be, her mother’s opinion of her friends always has weight with her. Moreover, what the mother is the girl will in all probability become, and a man has no better opportunity of learning a girl’s mental and moral qualities than by knowing the woman who bore and reared her.* That’s perfect. I have an idea. Let’s go. I believe we are finished here.”

“There’s more to read. I was actually getting interested in this courtship idea.”

He waited as Tom reluctantly gave up his book, setting them on the counter and following Cooper out of the hotel.

“We need to send a telegram.”

Cooper was moving speedily across the street where the mercantile and telegraph office sat side by side. Tom tried to keep up but moaned they were going too fast. “Will you slow down, son. There ain’t no fire!”

“Keep up! You’re the same age as me, Tom. Hurry, it’s late afternoon and they may be closing.” By the time the two reached the telegraph office, luck was with them. The proprietor hadn’t turned the sign over yet.

“You have two and a half minutes to send a telegram before we’re closed.”

That didn’t give him much time to think of something to say. He let out a sharp breath of air. “Okay, write this down. *To Mrs. Livingston of San Francisco. My concern for your daughter, Catherine Young, is urgent. Stop. As her suitor, I realized she has not seen her family in a long time. Stop. She’d want you here for her upcoming wedding. Stop. Please join us as we make the announcement of our upcoming nuptials. Stop. Sincerely, Pastor Cooper Murphy.*

“Coop, you can’t be serious? You’re sending for her mother?”

Cooper nodded. “It’s a perfect plan. She’ll be so happy to see her, I’ll be considered her hero. How will she ever be able

to refuse my hand in marriage after what I've done?" He looked at the proprietor. "Go on, send it."

"That will be four dollars and seventy-five cents, sir." Cooper paid the bill and left. His friend was on his heels, a frown on his face. "What's wrong, Tom?"

Tom shook his head. "From what you told me, she hasn't seen her parents in a long, long time."

"Twenty-three years. Catherine told me how they closed the door on her, but that was so long ago. After all these years, I'm sure hearts have healed and they'd be happy to attend her wedding."

"You said she wrote to her parents when her husband died and they ignored her letters."

Cooper rolled his eyes. "Tom, that was almost twenty years ago. Don't you think it is time to heal some wounds?"

He shrugged. "Well, if that's what you think your doing. Me, I'm staying out of a woman's business. Don't you dare tell her I came along with you because I had no clue what you were going to do."

"You afraid of Misses Young?"

He snorted. "I'm afraid of all women when they get their hackles up. Now, don't get me wrong, your Miss Young is a fine lady and all, but if she gets mad at you about this, I don't know if you will be marching to the altar, son."

Now that the adrenaline rush was over, Cooper was starting to regret what he did. "Is it too late to stop the telegram?"

The both turned to see the proprietor lock the door of the

telegraph office.

“Yep,” Tom told him. “You’d best go tell her what you did. The truth is best at this point.”

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Cooper was disappointed when he went to Wichita Falls a few days later to find no one had responded to his telegram. Had her parents passed on? Or, were they truly not going to respond? He sent a prayer to his heavenly father to change the hardened hearts of her parents. Even though it was done behind her back, Cooper really wanted to show Catherine that he was not toying with her. He wanted her to realize the depth of his intentions. What better way to do this than to have her own mother show up for their wedding. It had been a good plan yesterday but perhaps a bit desperate on his part. Even Tom had berated him for being impulsive.

He wondered now if he hadn’t made a mistake. According to Tom, who harped at him the whole way back, he was stepping in to territory that he should not be. In other words, Tom came right out and told him he was not minding his own business.

Harsh words for a pastor to hear. Then again, what kind of pastor was he if he wasn’t even able to prove himself as a suitor? What kind of man was he if he was not to be trusted? Although, she was trying to believe in him, he didn’t think Catherine trusted him. He saw the question in her eyes every

time she looked at him. He imagined if she were willing to tell him, she'd admit she didn't trust him. She had instead chosen to forgive him for being wrapped in another woman's arms. Would that scenario always exist between them? Were they able to get past it?

She had told him to come back Friday afternoon. He promised himself he'd be honest and tell her the whole truth then.

Two days later, Tom stopped working on the roof of the stable and stood, whistling loud and clear. Several others chimed in. "Where you going, son?"

Cooper grunted. "You know darn well where I'm going, Tom. Mind your business."

His laughter rang the whole way out of town. Cooper stopped along the way to gather a bouquet of daisies and bluebonnets for Catherine. He had, in his saddlebags, a bag of licorice he bought when he was in town the other day for some new clothes.

Cooper had on a pair of black brushed cotton trousers, a bright white long sleeved shirt and a dark jacket to match the pants. He hadn't wanted to wear his old shirt and vest to court his lady. He'd even donned a soft floppy bow tie, along with a black felt gambler's hat. He hadn't wanted to give up his boots, but the woman at the mercantile told him he'd look ridiculous without a pair of congress gaiters to go with the outfit.

Turned out the woman was Miss Addie, the town's

matchmaker. He figured her advice was best if he was going to impress Catherine.

He felt like an overdressed fool.

Yet, if she wanted a suitor then he was going to be the best darn suitor this side of heaven.

Tom's guffaws penetrated in his ear. He knew the man was teasing but darn it, calling him a dandy didn't sit well with Cooper. He ached to get back in his leather vest and wide-brimmed hat, but it was a point he was trying to make. Before he got too excited, he'd see what Catherine thought of his new look.

Apparently, Catherine was quite shocked when he rode in on his mare, dropping from the saddle and sending Uriel with Jeremiah, who had come out of the stable when he saw a rider. Her mouth gaped open when he presented her with one of the largest bouquets of flowers this side of the Mississippi.

"I am stunned," she told him with a grin so wide he almost gushed. Good thing Tom was back in Cooper's Ridge, otherwise the man would be bent over with laughter. Wait until he falls in love, Cooper thought. He'd make it as difficult for his friend as well.

Catherine came through the screen door with a glass of lemonade. "Please, sit, Cooper."

While he waited for her to take a seat on her rocker, he pulled the bench closer to her. He wanted her in close proximity for what he was about to tell her. To confess his sins. But, not yet. He wanted a little time to enjoy her

presence in case she booted him out of here.

“Where is everyone?”

Catherine pointed to the White Ranch. “Naomi is helping Nora with some last minute cooking and Russell and Wesley are getting the yard ready. I wanted to tell you before, but I was so busy. We are having a wedding reception this Saturday and I’d like to invite you to make a speech if you can.”

Was that what this was about? His pastoral duties? “Of course, Catherine. Congratulations to the groom. When did all this take place?”

“Nora and I got together and decided to take matters in our own hands. Wesley thinks it was his idea, but we had been scheming for some time now to find him a bride. Oops, I guess I should zip my mouth, confessing to a pastor what I did.”

“We all have our sins, especially me.” This was the perfect time to tell her, but when she gazed at him with those large brown eyes, Cooper melted. His heart beat against his chest so hard he was surprised it didn’t give him one of those heart attacks. This woman did this to him.

How was he going to tell her now?

She took his hand, her gentle fingers stroking the top of his. He ached to throw his arms around her and pull her close but suitors didn’t do that. They were gentlemen at all times.

Then when she lifted her hand and touched his cheek, staring into his soul as if she were begging him to kiss her, his

demeanor took a turn for the worst. He groaned. “The heck with being the perfect suitor!” He pulled her to him at the same time she wrapped her arms around his neck and pushed her mouth to his. Their lips met at the exact same time. Cooper knew he had to pull away but she was just as guilty, wasn’t she?

He leaned his forehead against hers. “We can’t do this. It’s not the right way to court.”

Catherine laughed! Was she laughing at him. He frowned.

When she saw the concern on his face she shook her head. “Oh, Cooper. I’m laughing at the two of us. Courting is for the young, isn’t it. Look at you, all dandied up and trying to be the perfect gentleman. I like you just the way you are. Please, don’t change who you are.”

He took her hands and held them between her, hoping after he confessed she’d feel the same way. “All I want to do is put my vest and comfortable pants back on. These are so itchy I can barely stand them.”

Catherine laughed and gave him a kiss on the cheek. “We’re too old to go courting. I’m sorry I asked, Cooper. My time has come and gone for a suitor. Let’s start with the friendship we have and take it from there.”

He agreed. Nodding, he knew he had to tell her. Then the buggy came in, loaded with her two sons and Naomi, along with Jeremiah from the stables. They brought some of Nora’s delicious cherry pie so it became a festival around Catherine’s kitchen table.

Before long, it was time to get back. “Will you walk with me to the stables, Catherine?” he asked, knowing it was now or never to be honest.

She took his outstretched arm while they strolled through the yard. “I guess we are courting right now, aren’t we?” Her laugh at her silliness made him smile.

He hoped she still wore the smile a few minutes from now.

Jeremiah ran outside to saddle Uriel while Cooper hesitated.

“What is it, Cooper. Is something wrong? You seem distracted.”

He faced her, wanting one last kiss in case she threw him off her land. He didn’t doubt she had a mighty fine temper. In his days as a bounty hunter, he had faced some fierce men. This, however, was one of the toughest things he faced. To be honest with a woman who may turn away. “I have an admission to make, Catherine. First, I’d like to kiss you.” *In case it is good-bye.*

“Since we’ve decided not to be foolish and do away with courting, how about I kiss you?” She stood on her toes, balancing herself with the wooden cane and gave him a soft kiss on his mouth. He closed his eyes, sending up a prayer for understanding before stepping back.

“There’s something I need to tell you.”

Silence.

“I don’t like the worried look on your face, Cooper.”

He liked the way she said his name. He swallowed. “I sent

a telegram to your parents.”

She had been smiling before. When he looked in to those lovely brown eyes, he saw fear, and hurt. “What do you mean? Why would you?”

As a man of the cloth he was used to dealing with delicate situations. His own was much worse. “I don’t know where to start, Catherine. When you wanted to be courted, I went to Wichita Falls to the library and searched through a ton of books to find out how to court you the best. Turns out I read how a suitor should impress the mother first. Except, your mother was in San Francisco and you hadn’t spoken in twenty some years.”

“So you thought you would convince her to come out here and see me? You went through all of that for me?” She didn’t sound mad or angry.

“I regret sending the telegram now. I fear that I was minding your business and I’m sorry.”

She raised herself on her tip-toes. Reaching up to touch his cheek, she smiled. “Cooper, I’m not angry at you at all. If you were willing to go to that length to show how much you care, then how can I be upset. Although, I promise you this, my mother will never leave the confines of her life in nob hill. Not to come to primitive Texas. Not even for me.”

“You don’t know that,” he told her. “What if she did?”

“I’m not sure I’d want to see her. She had her chance so often. I’ve written several times to no avail. She doesn’t consider me worthy enough.”

“It may not be that at all, Catherine.”

“You best be on your way, Cooper. Thank you for being honest. I can’t say I’m happy about what you did but I’m not angry.”

“So, you are somewhere in between.” He took the reins from Jeremiah, who appeared out of nowhere with his horse. “Let me walk you back to your house.”

Uriel walked behind, neighing softly. “She’s a beautiful horse with a unique name,” Catherine mentioned.

“It means the flame of God or Light of the Lord. When I’m riding her I’m usually doing the work of the Lord. She makes me feel as if he is right here, showing me how to deal with earthly problems.”

Catherine turned to him. “What a unique name. Good night, Cooper. Can we expect you tomorrow?”

“I’ll be here to wish Wesley and his bride well.”

“I’d like it if we continue to take things slowly. I don’t want to rush things.”

Cooper bowed as if he were a knight in shining armor. He took her hand and placed a kiss upon it. “Your wish is my command, Miss Catherine.”

She giggled as he left, riding his mare down the road, looking back to find Catherine watching him ride away.

It had been a great night. He was anxious to see what tomorrow would bring.

Chapter 5

All morning Catherine thought about the words Cooper spoke yesterday. She was frowning when Nora walking in her door.

“Good morning, Catherine. I thought you’d be happy Wesley has wed, now look at you!” She hurried to Catherine’s side and gave her a sisterly hug.

Catherine waved her away. “I’m fine. It’s not the wedding or anything that has to do with Wesley.”

“Well, spit it out.”

She shook her head. Nora White had become a close friend. She spoke her mind, which was a good thing. At least you knew where you stood with her. Now Cooper, his actions still puzzled her. “I’m not sure how I feel.”

“About?” Nora already knew who she was talking about. She’d make a comment every time the pastor stopped by.

“If it weren’t for you, Nora, I’d never have met Cooper.”

Nora lifted her chin up in the air. “Well, if it weren’t for me, you’d still be sitting at home every Sunday not getting the good word into your soul. Which, I may add, you needed at the time.”

Catherine shook her head. “I had no intentions of going to church until you insisted I ride with you.”

Nora crossed her arms. "I'm not going to say what's on my mind because I know you are a bunch of nerves since your son's reception will be held in two hours. However, don't you blame me for the pastor trying to court you and failing!"

"He didn't fail. We just decided we're too old to court each other!"

"Nonsense! Look at me and Rusty! Why, he courts me all the time and we've been married for awhile now. Just the other day he danced me under the stars and made love to me all night long. You are never too old for romance!"

"I don't know -"

Nora turned away towards the screen door. "Catherine Young, I think you are scared."

She sputtered. "Scared? Of what?" Catherine followed Nora outside to the porch.

"I think you are scared of yourself. What will you do with a man on your heels? You are so used to being on your own you don't want to give a man the chance to change your life."

Catherine's hand went to her mouth. A tear ran down her cheek. "Do you think so? Am I condemned to live my life alone? Like an old spinster?"

"If you do it's because you chose to, not because of any man! Let me tell you another thing, Catherine. I wasn't going to bring this up but if you are not careful, someone will snatch that man out from under you. How long do you think he will wait around for you? Take it slow, my foot. Why, the way that man kisses, I'm surprised he don't have women

jumping his bones left and right!”

Catherine stilled. “How do you know how he kisses?”

Nora stiffened. “Darn it! I didn’t want to ever let the cat out of the bag.”

“Since you are revealing all, you may as well tell me.”

Catherine sat down on the bench, she wasn’t sure she was up to Nora’s confession. Had he been kissing Nora as well?

She made room for Nora to sit on the bench beside her.

Nora sighed. “When I found out what my husband had done, I mean Robert, the dead one, I left here, thinking I had to find a reason to keep on going. I wanted an adventure. The first thing I did was go talk to a man of the cloth.”

“Which happened to be Cooper. Did he jump your bones?”

Nora shook her head. “It’s not like you think. I was vulnerable and he knew this. He made me a great steak dinner and we walked while he told me of his hopes and dreams for the town. On a whim, we both turned to each other and kissed. I wanted to know if there was anything between us. Turns out we laughed and realized there was nothing romantic there. We became better friends that day.” Nora smiled sweetly. “I was in love with Rusty, I just didn’t know it yet.”

Catherine wished she’d be able to make up her mind the way Nora had. “Pastor Murphy sure kisses lots of women.”

Nora laughed. “I think it’s the other way around. I believe women are always trying to kiss him. I mean, Catherine, look at the man!”

Catherine had to agree. He made her heart flutter and he wasn't even here!

"That's why you better make up your mind. A man like that does not stay single for long! I remember the day I walked down the aisle and Pastor Murphy led the ceremony. Rusty was still jealous of him even though I chose him. The funny thing was, Catherine, that day he had eyes for one woman."

Catherine blushed. She remembered how he kept stealing sideways glances at her that day.

"You, Catherine. He had eyes for you that day."

She thought about what Nora told her.

During the reception, while Catherine sat with her sons and their wives, she kept searching for Cooper. He hadn't come by to see her. Except for mingling with some of the visitors, he had kept strangely quiet and to himself.

She did catch him stealing glances her way. It made her secretly smile. Next Wednesday when he came by for a visit, she'd make up her mind then. Now that her sons were both married, it was time to think about her own life. She didn't want to be alone the rest of her life. But, if they married, she'd have to leave the place she loved most, her farm. Was that what was stopping her from taking a risk?

A sadness rippled through Catherine. Sometimes thinking too much gave her a headache. Tilting her head to the side, she closed her eyes and rubbed her temples. When she opened them up, Cooper was standing by a tree, slightly back from the crowd. None other than Miss Cynthia Anderson was

standing in front of him, her hand on his shoulder.

She had to admit, Cooper looked worried.

Catherine excused herself and walked toward the two. When Cooper saw her his eyes widened a slight bit. No one else noticed, but she did. With a sly smile on her face, Catherine called out. “Cooper, there you are! You promised me a dance.”

The relief on his face was priceless. As Catherine held out her hand, she nodded to Miss Anderson and whisked Cooper away before the poor woman reacted.

Catherine turned when she heard the sound of a string guitar playing a soft tune. “You don’t have to dance with me if you don’t want to.”

Cooper didn’t say anything, but his eyes told her everything. He pulled her closer than was proper as they began to dance with the other couples. “Thank you for rescuing me, Catherine.”

“It was clear to me Miss Anderson was pawing you. She needed to be taught a lesson.”

“You certainly showed her. I’m afraid I wouldn’t judge her too harshly.”

Was he sticking up for that woman? This was one of the reasons it was hard for Catherine to make a decision about Cooper. He was kind and nice and sweet but maybe he was too nice. Especially to women who were clearly trying to win him over. She didn’t want to have to deal with that the rest of their lives together.

She wanted a man who was true to her, who didn't have eyes for anyone else but her. Was that so wrong?

"There are some things about Miss Anderson's home life that is difficult for her. I'm not condoning what she is doing by any means."

"I certainly hope not. It's pretty obvious to everyone but her that we have an interest in each other. Why does she still try to win you over? And, why do you allow this?"

He pulled her to the side, away from the dance area so no one overheard. "I'm a pastor, Catherine. People tell me things that are confidential. I can see this is going to be a problem for you so I want you to know I'm only telling you this so it doesn't cause any more issues between the two of us."

She nodded, not quite understanding what he was getting at.

Cooper hesitated, as if he found it difficult to explain. "Miss Anderson is trying everything in her power to find a man to marry before the end of the year. After that, her father warned her he would make her marry her own cousin, Jeremy Anderson. Who, by the way, has tried to accost her several times. His first wife died mysteriously and Miss Anderson is worried she'll wind up with the same fate. Her father turns the other way even though he knows what is going on."

"That's horrible! I'm so sorry I misjudged her." Except she still didn't want the woman's hands on Cooper.

"I'm glad you understand. It's one of the reasons I put up

with her ways.”

Catherine shook her head. “It’s still not okay to behave that way. She is a beautiful lady. I don’t understand why someone hasn’t asked for her hand already.”

Cooper agreed. “The problem is her father and relatives. They are mean and do bad things. No one wants that kind of baggage. The men in Cooper’s Ridge are here to start over, to make a new life for themselves. They don’t want a woman who may cause them to slide backwards.”

“Perhaps she needs someone who isn’t afraid of her family.”

“Hopefully that man will come along before she is forced into a marriage she doesn’t want. Thank you for understanding.”

A thought occurred to her. “Maybe we should speak to Miss Addie in Wichita Falls on her behalf. She may be able to come up with an idea or find her a groom. What if she would send her off as a mail-order bride? At least Miss Addie will find her someone as she thoroughly checks the recipients out before she puts two people together.”

Cooper agreed whole-heartedly “That’s a great idea, Catherine. I’m glad you thought of it. You are a problem solver.”

“I’ll go visit her next week one day.”

Cooper stiffened. “No, Catherine. I don’t want you to go to the farm by yourself. I’ll go with you.”

“I’m not afraid of a bully. Trust me, I’ve taken care of

myself for many years.”

“You have and I’ll give you that. But, now that I’m in the picture, I simply will not have you going into a battle without me. Those Andersons are mean men.”

Catherine felt all warm inside. He was trying to protect her and was probably right about going there alone. She didn’t know the Andersons at all. “Can we go next Wednesday since you were going to visit with me anyway?”

Cooper took her hand. “We’d be alone for nearly an hours ride. Then, another hour back. I’d be honored to spend all those moments with you.”

Catherine blushed. He always said the sweetest things. “No wonder every woman wants to marry you,” she told him. “You are a charmer.”

Cooper dipped his head to sneak a quick kiss. Most people weren’t paying attention as the two stood in the shadow of the big oak tree. “Maybe I am, but, you are the only one I want to charm.”

Her heart soared at his words. Determined to help Miss Anderson instead of being upset, she excused herself from Cooper. “I want to make this right,” she told him and marched over to where Cynthia Anderson stood. There was a bonfire starting in the middle of the yard where the musicians gathered around to play. It looked as if Cynthia may try to snag one of the cowboys as her eye was on a younger fellow.

Catherine gently waved to her, giving her a smile. “Can we talk?” she asked.

Cynthia seemed surprised to have another woman call for her without being angry. Catherine wanted to get right to the point. “Miss Anderson, Pastor Murphy and I were discussing things and wanted to find a solution for you. We have an idea we’d like to talk to you about. Can we both call on you Wednesday afternoon?”

At her nod, Catherine went back to find Cooper to tell him the good news. She was excited to help the poor girl find a groom. Plus, Cooper would be free from the woman’s advances.

Wesley and his new bride said their good-byes and left to go home to the farm. “I’ll see you tomorrow,” she told her new daughter-in-law. “I’m spending the night here with Nora.” She wanted to give the newlyweds time to themselves. They’d be living in the house until a new cabin was built so tonight she’d enjoy the reception and Nora’s company. Wesley had some of his cabin finished, but it would take some time until it was complete.

“So am I,” Cooper whispered. “The ranch hands made up some room in the barn for a few of us from Coopers Ridge. That way we don’t have to leave in the dark.”

“Well, sir, then we should enjoy this splendid evening and dance the night away.”

He held out his arm. “After you, my lady.”

Catherine was on top of the world. She doubted there was anything that could ruin the good things that were happening in her life.

Wednesday morning Russell and Naomi loaded up the wagon while Olivia led Dreamer from the stables, along with a mare for Wesley. Even Jeremiah was joining in the adventure. Since Olivia, Wesley's wife, brought her own mare, she wanted to ride to Wichita Falls. They asked Catherine to go along, but she had her day planned out. "I'm sorry, I have to meet Pastor Murphy. I'll be going with him to visit the Anderson farm."

Wesley and Russell winked at each other. "Mother, you sure are spending a lot of time with the good reverend."

"We are friends; now mind your business. Neither one of you need to worry about me."

"We'll be back before sundown, Ma. Be safe and don't forget to carry your pistol."

"Bye now." She waved them off, smiling at their overprotective attitude.

Their adventure was quite the success with Miss Anderson agreeing to become a mail order bride. The only stipulation was it had to be done behind her father's back. Cynthia promised to notify him after she was married and settled with someone. Her fear was real and Cooper told her any time she needed to find a safe place, she was to go to the church and he'd get her to a sanctuary. Catherine agreed to take her in if it came to that. They just weren't sure what the Anderson

men were capable of.

Catherine was enjoying going along with him to visit families and solve problems. It gave her a new perspective on life. She wondered if maybe calling on people and praying for them was her next calling in life. Was this a sign to marry Cooper and make a life with him?

“Want to come along next week, too?” Cooper asked. “I love how you’ve been smiling all day. Even when we stopped by old Mrs. Smith’s farm, I believe you made her day.”

“She loves to show me all the things she made out of her embroidery. And talk, my, oh, my, she talks. But if it gave her joy, then I’m more than happy to go back.”

Cooper turned to her. “You’ll make the perfect pastor’s wife.”

Catherine turned to him. “What are you saying, Cooper?”

“I would like to ask your sons if I may have your hand in marriage.”

“Oh, Cooper. Can we wait, please? Wesley just got married and I want him to enjoy a bit of it before I go announcing our plans.”

Cooper sighed. “How long are we to wait, Catherine? We both know we’re perfect for each other. I’m getting the feeling you keep pushing things back. Do you want to marry me?”

She didn’t hesitate. At their age, it was important to take advantage of what was in front of them. Except, something was holding her back and she didn’t know what. “I do. There

will be so many changes. I'm worried and afraid, if you want me to be honest. It's why I asked you to go slow with me."

Cooper rode along in silence for some time before he spoke up. "I want to make you my bride, Catherine. I know we will be a great team and this town needs you." He stopped the buggy. "I need you."

Her heart beat so fast she was certain he heard it pounding. He leaned in for a kiss. She parted her lips, anticipating his sweet kiss. When he was done, he said in a hushed tone, "I honestly don't know how long I can wait. I'll try to be patient, Catherine. I promise."

"Thank you, Cooper. You mean so much to me. I'm sorry about my hesitancy."

"Can you at least give me a time frame?"

"I don't know." She sighed. "Three weeks?"

"That seems like a long, long time. I may waste away by then."

Catherine giggled at his nonsense. "You will not waste away, sir. I give you my word that in three weeks time, I'll have a decision for you. I just need a little time and I hope you understand."

He frowned. "I understand. It doesn't mean I have to like it, though."

They rode the rest of the way back, enjoying the scenery. She had to make peace with leaving her farm. She wanted to start a new life with Cooper but she had to let go of the past first. Catherine just wasn't sure how to say good-bye to it. For

some, getting married and moving on was a blessing. For Catherine, it meant leaving all she knew. The farm, her boys, they were her life. She just needed some time to put it all behind her. She just hoped Cooper had the patience of a saint. He was going to need it where she was concerned.

Chapter 6

Cooper waited until noon before loading the buggy and heading off to make his weekly visits. Catherine was supposed to meet him at ten in the morning, but she never showed up.

“Where’s Widow Young?” Tom called out from the back of the stables.

“Not sure.” Puzzled, Cooper wondered if perhaps he should go find out if something happened. But then if he did that, she may think he was smothering her. She had asked him to be patient with her and he vowed to do so last week when they were together. “She loves riding along every Wednesday to visit. I waited for two hours, but I’ve got to get going. So many people are expecting me today. I’ll hurry my visits and probably ride over to the farm later this afternoon to make sure everything is fine.”

Tom nodded. “Best be on your way, then. If she shows up, I’ll let her know you’ll be by later.”

“Thanks, Tom.”

Tom not only looked out for him but the town as well. He kept an eagle’s eye on everyone and everything. The livery was located at an angle that made it easy for Tom to see the whole of the main street. If anything happened, he’d be the first one to notice. Cooper was seriously thinking about asking him to become the sheriff, but wasn’t sure if Tom

wanted that job. They'd have to sit down and discuss things and since Tom was also on the town committee, Cooper was going to bring it up at the next meeting. Nothing like putting pressure on his friend in front of everyone else.

He sighed. Driving the buggy towards Mrs. Smith's farm wasn't the same without Catherine by his side. He already missed her. He gazed at the bench where a picnic basket sat instead of her. There were only three farms he had to visit today and he had been looking forward to setting up a picnic for the two of them. Now, he'd give the food inside to Mrs. Smith since Catherine wasn't along. It did him no good without her. He didn't like to eat alone. Not any more.

There were two weeks left for her to decide if she wanted to become his bride for sure. Cooper felt in his heart she would say yes. He knew she had to get some things straight in her mind. It was going to be a big change moving from her farm to his small parish beside the church. He had never thought about a larger home because he had no intentions of marrying when he'd built the town.

If she wanted a farm house, he'd build her one wherever she wanted to make their home. Perhaps they needed to sit down and discuss this more.

For some strange reason, intuition nagged at Cooper until he turned the buggy back towards the stable. His visits could wait. He had Tom get Uriel saddled up and raced out of town. Something wasn't right and he needed to make sure Catherine was all right.

Catherine loved Wednesday mornings. It was her time to visit with Cooper and spend the afternoon helping others. Plus, sitting in the buggy with the man she cared about was always nice. Every week it was like going on another adventure because the visits to the farms and homes were always different. A small smile curved at her mouth. She was extra careful with her dress and hair today. She pulled her hair back in a loose bun so a few strands hung free. Catherine had just the right amount of curl in her hair for it to form around her face. She felt young and alive today.

She made sure to leave a little early for a stop at Nora's at the White Ranch. After leaving the buggy in the front yard, Nora waved her inside for some coffee. Nora sat down at the table, making room for her friend. "You look extra lovely today, Catherine."

Catherine sighed. "Thank you. I'm going to visit with Cooper."

"I know. You shoot out of here every Wednesday morning like the wagon is on fire."

They both laughed. "Don't be silly, Nora. You must be imagining this."

"I'm afraid I'm not, Catherine. You are in love and it is clear to me and everyone else from this ranch and yours."

"I imagine it shows. I supposed after we are married, I'll be

moving to Cooper's Ridge. I'm going to miss these visits with you."

Nora patted her hand. "Now, Catherine. Stop stalling. You can visit me any time you want. I'm not as busy now that I have three daughters. They all love taking on the work for me. We can even take trips to Wichita Falls and Mill Ridge together."

"I actually came to discuss something important with you. My new daughter, Olivia, Wesley's wife, has asked a favor of me."

"Oh? Well, spit it out. Now you have me curious."

"She is an orphan and wants to help other orphans be placed here so the Mercy Train can come out this way. I offered to help. I don't want to take in any children since I'll be starting a new life in Cooper's Ridge, but I thought maybe your daughters would be interested in taking in an orphan or two."

Nora began to nod her head. "We certainly have the room here, don't we?"

"I thought so, too."

"I'll consider it and talk to them. I'm pretty certain they will do all they can to help."

Catherine got up to leave. "I'm going to discuss the possibility with Cooper today. Some of the married couples in his town may be wanting orphans as well. It doesn't hurt to ask."

The two walked out on the porch and down the steps,

talking. When Catherine was almost ready to climb up on the buggy seat, she gazed over towards the barn. A strange feeling arose on her skin and she got the shivers.

She cupped her hand over her eyes to block out the sun. The shade afforded her a better view. A man stood there, staring at her. She didn't think much about him until he took off his hat, wiping the sweat from his brow.

"Who is that?" she asked. There was a familiarity about him she wasn't able to pinpoint.

"Him? Why, your boys sent him here last week. He was looking for work. Must've had a hard time of things. When he got here, he almost toppled from his horse in exhaustion. Luckily, he met up with your sons along the trail and they steered him in the right direction."

"He looks like, oh, my, dear!" Her voice went hoarse as she whispered his name. "Patrick, is that you?" She slumped against the buggy. Nora reached over just in time to keep her from falling. Catherine began to sob. Tears ran down her cheeks like a waterfall in the middle of a desert.

Nora called for help. The stranger and one of the other hands quickly came running. "Get her in the house this instant, please!"

Rusty, Nora's husband, came running from the barn when he heard a commotion. "What's going on?" When he saw Catherine, he frowned. "She looks like she saw a ghost!"

Nora took Rusty's arm and headed inside. "I think she has. She called out the name Patrick."

Rusty shook his head. "What?"

Nora blew air from her lungs. "I only know one man named Patrick. Her dead husband."

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"I didn't mean to make her faint," the ranch hand told Nora. "She's my sister-in-law. I knew she lived in this area somewhere. I was stunned myself when I realized it was her. I didn't know I was so close."

Catherine heard his words. Her eyes flew open. "You're not Patrick? You are Kane, his twin brother, then."

He nodded and came forward, holding his hat between his hands. "I'm sorry, ma'am. I didn't mean no harm."

She stared at him, seeing her husband, alive and well, as if he hadn't died over twenty-three years ago. This man's face was weathered, wrinkles at his eyes, but the resemblance of her husband was astounding. The shock had rendered her senseless for a moment. She brushed off her skirts and stood up, slowly making her way to stand in front of him.

"Now, Catherine. You fainted; please be careful."

"It's okay, Nora. The shock is over. Patrick told me about his twin brother even though I never got a chance to meet him."

The man held out his hand. "My name is Kane. I'm sorry we had to meet this way. I've been looking for members of my family, including you, for well over a year."

She was curious. “How did you know I was here?”

“I went to your parents’ home in San Francisco. Your mother told me you lived on a farm. When I told her I was going to find you, she gave me a telegram with your location and asked me to give you a letter. That was about a week and a half ago. I traveled as fast as I could.”

Catherine’s heart thumped. Her mother wrote her a letter? It would be the first one in all these years. “Do you have her letter?”

“I’ll have to go the bunkhouse to get it. If you’ll excuse me, I’ll go find it.”

“I need some air,” Catherine told the others. “May we go outside?”

She stood on the porch, her knuckles white as she grasped the rails. Kane Young made his way to the bunkhouse, walking with the same swagger his twin brother had at one time. Catherine was still in shock. Her head hurt from trying to take it all in.

When Kane came out of the bunk house carrying the letter in one hand, Catherine fled from the porch, almost running across the yard to meet him. He handed it to her then began to tell her why he hadn’t come to his own brother’s funeral. “I was in prison. They weren’t going to let me out for anything. Believe me, I tried to get out for a furlough to go to the funeral.”

Catherine wondered if he did. There was something about Kane she was not sure about. He looked like Patrick, walked

like his twin and his voice was even close. Yet, she didn't feel as if she knew him at all. He was a complete and total stranger.

"Patrick didn't speak much about you. He said the two of you didn't get along too well and let it go at that. Why were you in prison?"

Kane closed his eyes. Catherine almost felt sorry for him. In that very moment, he had the same look as Patrick did and she caught herself before she lifted her hand to his face.

"I was wrongly accused of robbing a bank. I wasn't the best man in town, but I never robbed a bank. Sure, I was there that day, but the law took me for a robber. Hauled me to jail and off to the plenipotentiary. I never got a chance to defend myself. They sealed my fate in front of a circuit Judge."

The anger in his voice worried Catherine. "I understand why you weren't able to attend his funeral. I'm sorry you were in prison, Kane." She wasn't sure he was innocent, though. Patrick had spoken about him a few times and it wasn't all that good.

"Thank you. I'd like to see my brother's grave, if you don't mind. Where do you live?"

"Not far from here." This time she reached out her hand. He had paid his dues so she wouldn't be the one to judge. He took her hand while taking a step closer. "I wanted to be here so badly for his funeral. I felt it in prison when he died. Even though we fought a lot, a part of me died when he did."

He sounded so genuine, Catherine found it impossible to be

wary of him any longer. She had heard twins shared the same emotions. “How long were you in prison, Kane?”

“Just shy of five years. When I got out, I started working the mines in California but never made much except enough to keep a little money in my pocket.”

“It’s been twenty-three years since your brother died. I wish you’d have come to see us before now. But, you are here now, so that’s what counts. I want you to meet my sons. They’re married now and we’re doing well for ourselves.”

“If that’s an invite to supper, you show me the way and I’ll call on you this evening.”

He was quite bold, she thought. His brother had been the same way, so the words that tumbled from his mouth didn’t phase Catherine. It almost felt as if she were going back in time.

All of a sudden, she realized she was terribly late for her outing with Cooper. She didn’t have time to go there now, but she’d send one of her boys to let Cooper know something had come up.

Nora was at her side all of a sudden. “Don’t you have to go see Cooper?”

She swore Nora read her mind. “Since it’s so late and I’ve gotten quite the shock, I think I may ask Wesley or Russell to go there and let him know I can’t come today.” She was anxious to tell him about Kane but knew she wanted to read the letter from her mother. It would take time to get dinner ready, also.

“I’ll tell you what, Catherine. I’m in the mood for a long ride so Rusty and I will take him the news. Maybe even stay for one of his famous steaks at the saloon.”

Rusty nodded. “I’m getting the mares saddled up right now, Nora, my love.”

Both ladies smiled at Rusty. He loved his Nora so much, he never questioned her. Whatever she wanted, he did for her. A sadness rippled through Catherine. She wanted that kind of love and was hoping it would happen between her and Cooper. Yet, she held him off for reasons she wasn’t able to pinpoint.

The way they felt for each other was obvious. If only she’d get over this nagging inside that was holding her back. She looked at Patrick’s brother and gave him a huge smile. She needed a diversion and he was certainly that. “Supper will be ready at five sharp. If you ride straight through the lower end gate, the one that is always opened, you’ll come straight to my farm. Don’t be late.”

“Thank you, ma’am.” Kane bowed his head.

“Since you are family, you may call me Catherine.” She stepped closer and took his hand again. “Welcome, Kane. I’m glad you tried to find us.” With that, she stepped up and gave him a quick kiss on the cheek. He took his arms and wrapped them around her, giving her a hug she didn’t expect.

He was now family, so she wrapped her arms around his shoulders and gave him a welcome hug back. He hung on a bit too long for her peace of mind, and Catherine tried to take

a step back. His arms clung tight when Nora whispered. She heard Nora's words loud and clear.

"Well, we don't have to ride to Cooper's Ridge. He's here."

Catherine pulled back from Kane so hard, she almost stumbled. Kane reached out and grabbed both of her arms to keep her from falling. "Are you all right?"

She nodded. "I'm fine. I'll see you at supper, Kane."

When she turned to Cooper, who sat on his horse looking like a man on a mission, she tried to give him a smile.

He nodded, not smiling back. "Catherine."

The word seemed forced. "Hello, Cooper." She turned to see if Kane was behind her but he had already went back inside the barn.

It didn't look as if he were going to get down from Uriel so she walked over to him.

He stared down at her, his eyes so intense it made her shiver. She had not known him before Cooper's Ridge or before he was redeemed and ordained. Right now, he didn't look like a pastor at all. His eyes, dark and fierce as they stared down at her, gave her pause. He was clearly upset.

She imagined the men he had brought in from his days as a bounty hunter must've trembled in their boots when he stared like that. She wasn't afraid of him though.

Her only concern was about what it may have looked like to him. She realized it probably didn't sit well seeing the woman he cared about hugging a stranger. She did owe him an explanation. After all, when she found him in the arms of

Cynthia Anderson, she had been devastated. That was in the beginning of their relationship. He had every right to be upset, especially when she was supposed to be with him right now.

Her words tumbled out and got all tangled up. "I'm sorry I wasn't able to go along with you today. I've had quite a scare."

Cooper continued to stare. "Didn't look like you were scared at all. As a matter of fact, you looked plumb comfortable from what I saw."

Oh boy, she didn't start this out well at all. "Would you please come down here and talk with me at eye level. My neck is straining. We can't talk like this."

Cooper slid from his saddle in one easy motion. He was so handsome today as he was every single day. His dark vest covered his light-colored long-sleeved shirt and a gun belt hung low on his hip. He'd never be able to hide the fact that he had the demeanor of a man not to be trifled with. "Well, guess we can talk like this. Why don't you go ahead and tell me what's on your mind."

Dear Lord, help me to explain this awkward situation. Give me your words instead of my own. "Cooper, I know you saw me in the arms of that stranger. I can only imagine what you must've thought."

He nodded. "Probably the same thing you thought when you saw Cynthia Anderson accosting me. Except you ran out the door and didn't let me explain. Well, here I am. Explain

away.”

His voice sounded so hurt. No one else would recognize it but she did. “That man has been hunting his family for over a year. He is Patrick’s brother, Kane Young. My brother-in-law.”

His eyes widened for a split second. “Where has he been for the past years? Didn’t your husband die over twenty years ago?”

She nodded. “A little over twenty-three years. I had my twins a year later and he says he was in prison when Patrick died.”

“Prison? Well, that explains why he has such shifty eyes.”

Catherine frowned. “No need to be judgemental. You have a past as well and no one judges you.”

“My past didn’t involve holding my woman in his arms!”

Catherine almost laughed out loud. Cooper was jealous! “Cooper, he is family. There’s no need to be upset. I gave him a welcome hug and invited him to supper.”

“What? A convict? At your farm? Alone?”

Catherine smiled. “No, Cooper. I’m inviting the boys and their wives as well. And you, if you’d like to come.”

“Hell, yes, I’ll be there!” He frowned. “Excuse me, Catherine, I didn’t mean to cuss like that.”

She was trying so hard to hold back her laughter. He was clearly jealous. She wanted to reassure him there was no need to worry. On the other hand, it probably wouldn’t hurt him a bit to understand what she went through. “Supper is at five

sharp. I'll set out a plate for you."

"I'll be there."

They stood staring at each other for over a minute.

Catherine took a step back. Cooper took a step forward. "I better get back. I've got three farms to visit this afternoon."

"Again, I'm so sorry if I made you worry."

"I'd say I'm sorry as well, but, there's nothing to be sorry about. Except, maybe this." Cooper pulled her into his arms and kissed her so thoroughly she went weak in his arms. He had bent her back, holding her, his mouth on hers in a kiss she'd never forget. When he brought her upright again, she was dazed and speechless.

He let her go and went to stand by Uriel's side. Turned back and gave her a look of interest she'd never forget. "I'm not sorry after all. The way you are standing there, stunned, means you felt the same thing I did. Just so you know, no other man will ever kiss you like that. Or, make you feel that way. Especially, a stranger that calls himself family. Remember that, Catherine. I'll see you at five sharp."

Then he rode off like he had not just delivered a kiss so devastating she was hardly able to breath. Nora stood there, hands on her hips, a smile a mile wide. "Well, well, well! Talk about staking a claim!"

Catherine stared at Nora. Her hand went to her throat. She was utterly unable to speak for a moment. When she finally got a hold of herself, a small whisper came out. "I am afraid I may faint."

Nora took her arm, steering her towards the house. “Let’s get you a cup of hot tea before you head home. Lord knows with the state you are in you may crash that buggy into a tree.”

Chapter 7

Cooper guided Uriel across the area of the road where it dropped off pretty deep. He hadn't been paying attention but instead was thinking about her. Thankfully Uriel guided them both in the right direction. "That's my girl," he told her, patting her neck.

If he were to be honest he was shook up from their kiss. He hadn't meant to get so passionate, but when he touched her mouth with his own, he stopped thinking and wanted to claim her for his own. He wanted to brand her so no one else's kisses would ever be good enough for her.

Was he worried about her brother-in-law? Darn right he was. He should listen to the Lord's words in the very sermons he preached each Sunday. Yet, God gave him a brain and he sure was going to use it. There was no way a ghost from the past was going to win over the woman he loved.

Perhaps he needed to sit in his own church for awhile and ask for forgiveness. He stopped when he saw the white church, sent Uriel to the stables with a pat on her rump, and waved at Tom who was outside the livery working on a project.

Cooper climbed the steps to the church and went inside, taking a seat in the back row. He stared at the cross for several minutes, then closed his eyes. Sometimes, being in the

presence of his savior was all he needed to refresh his thinking.

Several moments later, he heard someone come through the front door and sit along side of him.

“Two stragglers come through today, wanting a bed and some grub.”

“Where are they now?” Cooper was hoping they weren’t going to cause any trouble. If they were, he’d need to run them out of town before five o’clock. He was going to be at Catherine’s place for supper come hell or high water.

“Where are they now?”

“Sent them to the boarding house.”

“Tell me your thoughts, Tom.”

He shrugged. “They don’t seem to be dangerous, although I’ve been keeping my eye on them. Went to the saloon for about a half hour but then went back to the boarding house. It appears as if they are looking for someone or something. Can’t quite put my finger on things yet.”

“I’m sure you will, Tom. Now’s a good time to take the Sheriff’s badge, don’t you think?”

“Not sure I’m ready and willing for that yet, son.”

“I understand. You may as well since you all but do the job of a sheriff now.”

Tom grunted. “You may want to hire someone then so I don’t have to work so hard.”

Cooper ran a hand through his hair. “Why don’t we let the town vote. Then you can’t say no. You know darn well they

will all vote for you, Tom.”

“Yep, that’s what I’m afraid of. Let’s not go there yet, son. Tell me, how was your afternoon.”

Cooper ran through the events that occurred except he didn’t mention the all-consuming kiss between him and Catherine. He was still shook up and wondered if she was thinking about him right now. “The man has shady eyes. I’m not sure about him yet, but I’m going to find out at supper.”

“I best keep my eye out on the two strangers, then. Funny, two arrive here out of the blue the same time Widow Young’s brother-in-law shows up.”

An awareness Cooper had forgotten shot through his veins. Adrenaline surged through as he realized she may be in harms way. Something wasn’t right. Like he had always done before, he had to weigh out everything before going off half-cocked. “I tend to agree, Tom. Keep your eye on those two.”

“You be careful yourself, Cooper. We can’t run this town without a pastor.”

“Highly doubt you need me to run this town, Tom. You’re doing a heck of a job on your own lately while I’m trying to figure out a woman.”

“I did notice you have your head in the clouds here of late.”

Cooper grinned. “You could say that. She’s got me in a tizzy, that’s for sure.” He stood. “I best be on my way. I still have a few visits to make this afternoon.”

Tom slapped him on the back. “Nope, they’re all done. I

sent Marty to go in your place. Afraid he'd only do it if I gave him the contents of the picnic basket."

Cooper roared with laughter. Marty was a great kid. He was in his early twenties, but he was a little slow at thinking. "He may be slow, but he sure knows how to make a deal."

Tom agreed. "Yeah, and he said Cynthia Anderson seemed upset and scared when he stopped by there. He said she didn't talk long and said she had to go."

"I told her to come here to find sanctuary in the church if she needs to. Catherine agreed to take her in if need be. Miss Addie, the match-maker from Wichita Falls, is working on finding her a groom. She offered to become a mail order bride but the Anderson men can't know about this yet. She's worried they will force her to marry one of the cousins."

"That ain't right," Tom said. "Forcing someone to marry a man you don't like, now that's not right."

"I'll be gone for a few hours this evening. You make sure to keep your eyes wide open, Tom."

"Sure will, son. Nothing gets by me in this town."

"No, it sure doesn't."

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Cooper stopped by the White Ranch before proceeding to supper at Catherine's house. He searched out Rusty and found him with his foot on the low rail of the corral, watching one of the horses being trained.

“You got a minute, Rusty?”

The older man turned and put out his hand. “Sure do, Pastor Murphy. What brings you here?”

Rusty had a gleam in his eye Cooper didn’t miss. He was pretty sure the old man saw the way he had kissed Catherine earlier, yet he didn’t care. He wanted the whole world to know she was off limits.

“I was wondering what you think of your new hire, Kane Young?”

Rusty pushed his hat back, revealing a high forehead with a few dents from age. “Well, I’ll tell you the honest truth. I’m keeping my eye on him.”

“I suspected so. There’s something I can’t put my finger on.”

Rusty studied him. “I believe you’re right, Cooper. Seems as if your skills at whatever you were before coming to Cooper’s Ridge are working well. I didn’t like you at first, you know.”

“Boy, do I ever. That day you came to town to collect Nora, I thought I was going to be shot on the spot. There was a fire in your eyes only Nora White could put out.”

“She puts a fire in my belly every day and night.”

Cooper nodded. “That’s how I feel about Catherine.”

Rusty patted him on the shoulder. “We know. You made it clear as a bell today.”

“I intend to make it known again. I’m going to supper and if Kane Young gets out of line, he’s a dead man.”

“Some harsh words coming from a preacher.”

“I’m not your ordinary preacher, Rusty.”

“That’s why we like you, Cooper. You keep things pretty lively around here. I don’t even fall asleep in church any more.”

Cooper laughed out loud. “It’s because you’re so busy stealing kisses from your wife. Shame on you, Rusty. Acting like that in my church.”

Rusty grinned, his eyes lighting up. “Between me and you, I am pretty sure God thinks me and my wife are one heck of a couple. He speaks of love in his word. Well, we speak it in our mannerisms. I sure ain’t sorry about that.”

“You keep on making your wife happy, Rusty.”

“A word to the wise, Murphy. Don’t go killing anyone. I think murder is a sin.”

Cooper grinned. “I guess that was a bit harsh. When it comes to Catherine, I can’t seem to help myself.”

“I know the feeling. You best get moving; it’s all but five o’clock.”

Cooper took off on Uriel, across the grass and through the gate between the two properties. He had originally wanted to get there before Kane but realized he had a better chance of talking to Rusty if Kane was already gone.

He was right, except now he had to put up with the man hovering over Catherine. They were sitting on the front porch. Cooper held himself in check. Kane was sitting on the bench close to Catherine where he always sat.

He had a vague image of himself picking up the man and

throwing him off the porch then shook his head. That wasn't nice. Well, no one ever said Cooper was a nice guy. His old ways were coming out. Jealousy was an awful thing. He looked up. *Keep me in line, Lord. I can't do this without you to guide me!*

Jeremiah came out to get Uriel. "Do you mind if I put her in the corral? I built a small jump I want her to try."

"Sure, kid. You coming to supper?"

"Not tonight. Liberty is ready to give birth so I have to stay close to the stable. Widow Young said she'll bring a plate down."

"Where's Wesley and Russell?" It seemed quiet here for some reason.

"They went to town with their wives for some meeting about the orphans."

That meant if he hadn't come to supper tonight, she'd be here alone with Kane Young. Cooper gritted his teeth. He strode across the yard, the anger seeping from him. Thank God, he was here to protect her. Jeremiah alone wouldn't be able to hear her if she called out from the house. It was too far away.

By the time he got to the porch, his heart had settled down. It wasn't pumping a mile a minute any longer. "Catherine," he said, deliberately calling her by her given name. She stood when he came up on the porch and he took both her hands in his, slowly bringing each one to his lips and pressing a soft kiss on one hand, then the other.

She gave him a look that said she knew exactly what he was doing. It caused a slight blush to cross her cheeks. He stared into her eyes, silently admitting he was jealous. It didn't matter. She was his and he wanted her to know this.

When she smiled, her eyes crinkled at the far corners. He wanted to place a kiss on each eyelid when she closed them briefly. Instead, he let her go, turning to Kane. "Good evening," he told the man, who still hadn't stood. He held out his hand as the man reluctantly took it. "Good to see you again," he lied. Cooper gave his hand a fast shake, gripping it hard, in a battle of strength. Kane held on, staring right back, daring Cooper to squeeze harder.

He knows I'm on to him, Cooper realized. Good. Then he knows not to do anything foolish in front of Catherine. Cooper let go, as if in submission. He wanted Kane to believe he had the upper hand. That way he'd be surprised when he tried whatever it was he was here for.

"Shall we go in to eat dinner?" Catherine held out both her arms. Cooper didn't like when Kane wrapped his arm through hers, but he tried to keep quiet. He didn't want Catherine running him off. He had to stay collected and calm this evening, otherwise there would not be anyone here to protect her.

And he was more certain than ever there was a reason she needed protected. The man had no shame. He saw it when he looked him square in the eye. He saw it in many men over the years. The greed. There was something here on Catherine's

farm he wanted.

It wasn't going to be her. Or, her farm. This property was prime land to anyone who was looking for a working farm. Was Kane trying to secure himself here? He knew many men who lost their lives in the war. When they never came home, a brother or uncle married their widow. That was not about to happen here. No way. Besides, he's twenty-three years too late.

Cooper sat through the whole meal while Kane tried to charm Catherine. It seemed to be working until she'd glanced at Cooper with a deep and abiding look, making it clear there was no mistaking who she cared about. Several times, she laid her free hand over Cooper's as she spoke. When she did that, Cooper gave Kane a raised brow.

Kane was nervous. Cooper glanced down to find his right boot tapping the floor. His leg shook a few times, as if he was anticipating something to happen.

He wished her sons were here on the farm. But, since they weren't, he'd handle things alone. Kane may not even make his move tonight but something told Cooper otherwise.

Yeah, there was something in the air tonight. Cooper glared at the man. He sensed it like nothing else.

Something was going down.

Cooper had several weapons stashed in various places on his person. Along with a shotgun on his saddle, which did him absolutely no good inside here. Cooper was an expert aim, so he wasn't too worried. He just wanted to make sure

Catherine was out of harm's way.

Kane's fork scraped over his almost empty place. He pushed it back and rubbed his stomach. "That was a fine meal, Catherine. Thank you for inviting me."

"You are very welcome, Kane. Are you ready to see your brother's grave now?"

Cooper planned to walk along. There was no way she was going to her husband's grave site alone with him. It was too far away.

"Yes, I'm wanting to see it."

The moment Catherine asked if he wanted to go to the grave site, the man's eyes gleamed in greed. Like he was going to find a prize there. It didn't make sense.

"I have some things to discuss with Pastor Murphy here first about the orphans. You can either wait on the porch until we are finished, or, you can go ahead of us. I'll come along in a few minutes."

He stood, almost toppling the chair. "I'll go now. If you don't mind, I'd like some time alone with him."

Catherine gave him a big smile. "Of course you would. I'll finish up here and be there in a half hour. Will that be enough time?"

"I believe so. Now, where is the grave?" Cooper thought he was in a big hurry to see a dead man.

"If you go past the house, around the right side of the barn and up the small hill surrounded by those trees, you will see the cemetery. There is a bench to rest your feet and a view

that looks out over the Young Farm.”

Kane gathered his hat from the peg by the door. “Much obliged,” he mumbled while his hand was on the screen door. “It may be awhile. Why don’t I come back up when I’m finished. Honestly, there’s no need to come there. I’m sure it’s tough for you even after all these years.”

“I don’t mind at all but if you want privacy, then so be it. We’ll wait on the porch.”

“Thank you kindly. I have quite a lot to say to my brother.”

Catherine’s smile was off. It didn’t reach her eyes. Cooper noticed that right away. “I’m sure you do,” she told him. “Now, go on, we’ll see you in a bit.”

The moment the door closed and he was out of site, Catherine gave him a worried look. “Do you mind helping me with something?”

“Sure.”

She reached behind him where he stood by the door and pulled the shotgun from the wall. “Hold on to this while I get more ammunition.” She hurried to her kitchen table, slid a drawer from underneath and took out a handful of bullets. Sticking them in her dress pocket, she looked at Cooper with rounded eyes. “He’s not going to find what he came here for.”

Shock registered first before Cooper stepped forward. Obviously, Catherine was not some idle woman who was scared of her own shadow. “How do you know?” he asked, cautiously.

She pulled open another drawer that revealed a large metal

box. "Because he is looking for this."

"What is in there?" Cooper wanted to see what they were dealing with. He was aware of the two men in his town right now. Were they working with Kane? More than likely they were. When she opened the top he looked in. Cooper whistled. "Railroad money."

"How do you know?"

"The bags. I worked for the railroad right after the war for a short time. Those bags were payroll for the railroad workers. Looks like someone had these buried for a long, long time."

Catherine shifted on her feet. Cooper gathered her in his arms. He smelled the fresh scent of lavender in her hair.

"Don't worry. We'll get to the bottom of this."

"To think he was here, on my property, to bury that box makes me sick."

"How long has it been here, do you know?"

She shrugged. "It's been well over two years ago that I found the box. I hadn't been keeping up with the cemetery one summer and I felt so badly I completely stripped all the weeds and noticed fresh ground. When I kept digging, I came upon this metal box. It had to have been put there sometime in the late summer months."

He gave her another hug. "Why didn't you just leave it there? For Pete's sake, Catherine, this is serious business."

She stepped back, crossing her arms. "Because I wanted to know who dared to place stolen property on my farm."

Cooper pulled her in to him. He brushed the back of his hand over her cheek. "You are one brave lady. I love you, Catherine."

Her eyes filled with tears. "I believe I love you as well, Cooper. Now more than ever. I'm so scared."

He held her while she let the tears fall. It was a brief moment of weakness. Then, like the fiery woman she was, she pulled back, wiped her face and nodded to him. "Well, now that I know it is none other than Patrick's evil brother, I'm going to run him off."

"It's more complicated than that, Catherine. He has two accomplices. I'm pretty certain they are in Cooper's Ridge right now. They came in this morning."

Her face paled. "Should I give this to Kane? It isn't worth someone getting hurt."

"No. It's government money that doesn't belong to them. I know there are two ex-Rangers in the area. I think we need to get them involved, but there may not be any time. If he thinks you took the metal box, he won't ask questions. I see evil in his eyes."

"I knew he was no good. Patrick told me years ago to steer clear. He said he warned his brother to stay away. When you saw me hugging him, I was trying to give him a second chance, but my head and heart were telling me to be careful."

"He knew where you lived all along."

"Yes, he had to." She shivered. "He told me a lie. He'd been in California right before he came here. He said he went to

my mother's house and she gave him a telegram. Was it yours? Dear Lord, he may have harmed my parents!"

"Not sure why he was there unless he was in prison again and had just gotten out. Did he say if your parents gave him money? He may have needed some travelling cash and thought that was the best way to get it."

Catherine shook her head. "No, my mother, - wait! She sent along a letter. I'm sure she gave him something in return for delivering the letter to me. It all makes sense now."

"It's coming together. We need to get you out of here before the others show up."

"I'm not leaving here. This is my home."

Cooper took the metal box and wrapped a towel over it. "This is what you are going to do, Catherine." Hard eyes drilled into her own frightened ones. Before he was able to finish, Jeremiah knocked on the screen.

"We have a colt. It's healthy and already trying to play." Cooper was glad he showed up. He would need all the help he could get.

"This is bad timing, Jeremiah. Congratulations. Now, I need your full attention. Take Widow Young, put her in a buggy and the two of you head to Wichita Falls. You may run into some nightfall but it won't be for long. I want you to go right now."

"What's going on? I can help."

Catherine hung onto his shirt collar. "No. I can't leave you here alone to deal with this. It's my problem."

Cooper kissed her quiet. Then he reached up and pulled her arms from around his neck. He took the shotgun and placed it in her arms. "Go now! I won't be alone. When those two outlaws leave my town, Tom will be following them. They will never hear nor see any sign of him behind them. They'll think I'm the only one here. Now, please, Catherine, go while he's still digging up that box."

She gave the shotgun to Jeremiah, turned and planted another kiss on his lips, and picked up the metal box and ran out the door, Jeremiah on her heels.

Cooper followed behind, walking backwards, his hand on the pistol in his belt, making sure Kane hadn't returned. It was good the cemetery was so far away and the road out of here was hidden from his view. Catherine needed to get out of there now. He knew there was going to be gunfire and didn't want her in the middle. Outlaws like these don't give up. Especially the greedy ones.

In the stable, the buggy was hitched and he helped her onto the benched seat. "When you get there, go find your boys and give the metal box to the sheriff. He'll alert the Rangers in the area. Godspeed."

"I'll do my best to get her there safe," Jeremiah told him. His chin shot up a notch knowing that Cooper entrusted him with the lady of the house. The simple truth was Cooper had no other options. As long as she was far away, no one was able to hurt her. That's all he cared about.

His life? He wanted to love Catherine the rest of his life.

Yet, the fact was, if he had to lose his to protect her, then that's what a man does.

Chapter 8

The moment they entered Wichita Falls, Catherine saw her sons standing outside the big hotel with a crowd of others. Horses, wagons and buggies were all lined up in front of the hotel. It appeared the meeting was over and everyone was saying their goodbyes.

“Russell! Wesley!” She half-stood on the bench and called out, holding the shotgun in her one hand. The moment they saw their mother, the boys turned and ran towards her, their wives close behind.

“What’s going on? Are you all right?”

She hopped down from the buggy when Jeremiah brought it to a stop. “Stay here, Jeremiah,” she told him, handing him the shotgun and running towards her sons; the metal box in her arms. “We need to find the sheriff right now!”

Both the sheriff of Wichita Falls and Mill Ridge were at the meeting with their wives. They were coming down the steps of the hotel when Russell waved them both over.

The two law men set their wives aside before hurrying over to Catherine. She hadn’t wanted to get the whole crowd stirred up, but everyone was looking her way. There was no way to hide anything in this town.

Catherine related the situation to both sheriffs, handing over the metal box.

Montana took the box. "I think we can get some extra help out there. Montana turned as two men and their wives came down the steps. "Noah! Grant! Over here!"

The men, tall and formidable looking, each gave their wives a kiss on the cheek before strolling over to the others. Their presence was intimidating to those who feared the law, even though they had both retired from their jobs as Texas Rangers more than a year before.

The sheriff relayed the situation to both men. Grant turned to Catherine. "Tell me what your brother-in-law looks like."

"He looks exactly like my dead husband. Oh, dear, I suppose you don't know what Patrick looked like, either." She gave a description, and before she knew what was going on, the two Rangers disappeared. Dust from their horse's hooves rose up in the air.

Their wives came to stand with Catherine. "Come along, dear. Let's get you in the hotel and off the street."

"I need to go back to my farm. Cooper is there, alone, with a bad man, possibly more. I am so afraid for him." Normally, Catherine wasn't a woman who shed tears easily, but now they flowed non-stop down her cheeks.

"This is what happens when we fall in love. Come along, there is no sense in standing out here where everyone can see you."

Catherine followed, instructing Jeremiah to help Wesley and Russell. The women all went back inside while the men stood talking, gathering information to figure out what to do.

The ladies led her to the lobby, where they all sat with her. Lily, the owner of the hotel, brought everyone some hot tea, fussing over Catherine the whole time. As several ladies poured tea, more women came inside.

Catherine imagined there were close to twenty-five women in the room. “What is going on?”

Rebecca, the sheriff’s wife, patted her hand. “You’ve come to the right place, my dear. The men are heading to your farm right now to take care of business.”

“The men?”

“Just about every man in Wichita Falls and beyond.”

“Oh my!” Catherine was amazed and yet scared for Cooper. “My love, I mean, Pastor Cooper is there, alone with Kane. He said two more men may show up from Cooper’s Ridge.” The thought of them not getting there in time swallowed her up and sent more tears down her face. She had to get a grip on this, but the fear of something happening to Cooper was so incredibly real.

Cooper had stayed behind to save her. She knew it with every breath she took. The look of intent in his eyes was of a man who protected his woman. Catherine closed her eyes, not wanting to deal with the reality of what was happening. Yet, she had to.

Her sons! When she opened her eyes, she went to her two daughters, who were almost in tears. Wesley and Russell had led the others back to the farm. She had to be strong for these women now. There was no time for tears.

Taking a long, deep breath, Catherine gave the two a hug. “Ladies, we have to stay strong. The whole town of Wichita Falls has gone to our farm to save one man. It’s like a small army will arrive there and take the bad guys by surprise.”

“I hope you are right,” Olivia said, wiping her eyes with a handkerchief. “I’m so worried.”

Naomi tried to smile but Catherine could see she was just as scared. “We’re all scared, ladies. But, let’s be tough for the men. Promise me,” she told them.

After a few minutes, the ladies dried their eyes and nodded, agreeing with Catherine they needed to be stronger than the rest.

“Wesley and Russell know the lay of the land. They’ll be able to sneak up on any intruder and capture them before they know what is happening.”

Ten minutes later, Miss Addie burst through the front doors, carrying two baskets filled with food. “It may be a long night, ladies. I know you all had some sweets and lemonade at the meeting, but this is much more substantial. All of the children are snug in the empty beds at the boarding house. Don’t anyone worry about them.” She spread out the food in the basket, several loaves of fresh bread and churned butter, along with some fresh apples that had been picked from the orchard earlier that day.

Another resident burst through the doors, carrying a large pot. The man had a chef’s apron wrapped around his waist. A woman, one of the owners of Jenna’s café, carried two more

baskets filled with a variety of cheeses and desserts. “Leftover Chicken Soup from Jenna’s Café,” the man shouted.

A line gathered around the food, but there was no way Catherine was able to eat a bite of anything. Her stomach was churning so fast, she was afraid she’d bring it all up. Ruby, one of the women who lived on a farm outside of town, brought her a small plate. “I know you probably don’t want to look at food right now, but you have to keep yourself strong. What you said to your daughters was encouraging. You are a very courageous lady.”

“Thank you, even if I don’t feel all that courageous.”

Ruby gave her a quick hug and disappeared. Catherine was astounded by how the town all turned to each other, not one person asking questions. They jumped in and helped wherever and however they could. She was amazed and stunned. All these years, Catherine had felt alone at her farm, ashamed to associate with any of these good folks because of what she thought she’d be perceived as.

Now, at a time when she no longer expected something bad to happen, they were all here for her. She needed to let them all know. Catherine slowly stood, holding the small teacup in her hand. She lifted it up. “May I say something, please?”

It took a few moments for everyone to notice she wanted to speak. When the room grew silent, she gave everyone in her sight a wavering smile. It was all she was able to muster. “I’d like to acknowledge each and everyone here tonight. I’ve stayed on my farm minding my own business for so many

years; I had no idea there were brave and wonderful people only a short distance from where I live. The love I feel in this room tonight surpasses all I'd expected, and I'm grateful to each one of you for being here to see me through. You know my family has had tragedies with my husband dying and several other things over the years, but tonight is one of my darkest hours. The man I love is at the farm fighting for his life because of me. I couldn't bear to face this alone. So, thank you all."

She was gathered into someone's arms, followed by another as each person in the room came over and gave her a hug. Catherine was feeling a bit overwhelmed by the time each person was done.

That's when a man burst through the front doors. Catherine recognized him as one of the ranch hands from the White Ranch. She stepped forward.

"Someone's been hurt! Where is the doctor? He's not in his office or his home? I saw all the buggies out front. Is he here?"

Catherine went up to him, taking a hold of the man's sleeve. "Who was hurt?"

When the cowboy recognized her face, he let out a deep breath. "One of the men from Cooper's Ridge was riding through our farm. He said he had business and was passing through to get there faster. We let him through when two men came out of nowhere and jumped him down by the gate to your property. Some of our men ran to see what was going

on and found the man's face bloodied. He was out cold, slumped across the saddle."

Relief surged through her when she realized it had to be Tom and not Cooper. Yet, she still didn't want anyone hurt. Those men meant business if they were willing to hurt a man. "That's it! I'm not standing around here waiting for something to happen! I'm going home to protect my farm and the man I love!"

"Catherine, no, you can't. The men will take care of this."

"The men were there and this happened! Can someone send the doctor to the White Ranch?"

"He went with the men to your farm!"

"Thank you everyone, but I can't stay here. I'm going to fight for my farm."

"We're coming with you!" Olivia and Naomi got up.

"So are we!" Rebecca and Sophie, the sheriffs' wives, called out.

Ruby followed, along with a group of women Catherine didn't know their names. Elizabeth and Annabelle, the wives of the two Rangers both picked up their skirts and each drew a pistol from her boots.

"Lily, can you give us some more weapons?" One of the ladies shouted. She rose from the back of the room. Holly, her cousin David's wife, stood. She pulled a rifle from behind the counter.

"Coming right up," Lily told her. She left for a moment and came running back in the room, a handful of shotguns in her

arms and a few pistols stuffed in her pockets.

Catherine began to laugh. It may have sounded hysterical but she didn't care. As tears streamed down her cheeks, she left the hotel, along with twenty-five of her vigilante new friends to help save the farm.

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Cooper saw the lone rider near the gate. It was almost dusk, rendering it hard to see from the peek hole in the loft at the stables. He hadn't gone back into the farmhouse, not wanting to be a sitting duck for the men. He actually was thinking of Catherine. He knew these men would start shooting, and he didn't want her house to be riddled with bullet holes.

Kane was still at the cemetery. Cooper didn't understand what was taking him so long. Was he digging up the whole grave? His absence had given Cooper time to find a place to hide where he was able to see the front of the property and the back. He'd know who was coming and going.

Daylight was all but gone. The lone rider's shadow was certain to be Tom. He knew the way the man sat a horse. His instincts were right, but the moment Tom got almost to the gate that separated the White and Young properties, two men came from out of nowhere. Before Cooper had a chance to raise his shotgun, one of the outlaws raised a hand and pistol-whipped Tom. He slumped over in his saddle.

The horse turned abruptly, trained to leave at the first sign of trouble. Tom had a way with horses that was magical. His mare shot away from the others, retracing their trail when a group of the ranch hands from the White Ranch got hold of the reins. They lifted Tom from the saddle and carried him to the main house. There was nothing Cooper could do. Tom was taken care of. He gritted his teeth. Without his partner's help, things got a little more dangerous. Not that he'd back down. Kane and his cronies were done with their outlaw ways, starting right now. He'd have to pick them off, one at a time.

Cooper watched with trepidation as the men who jumped Tom hid in the shadows when two of the ranch hands rode down to take a look around, rifles cocked. Fearing an ambush, he was relieved when they rode back to the house.

Before long, the two hiding in the shadows came out, then rode through the yard, one of them whistling. Since there was no light on in the house, they didn't stop there. For now, Catherine's home was safe.

"Kane!" One of the men called out. "Where are you?"

Kane ran through the yard, his chest heaving. He was swearing like a soldier, damning the woman who had sent him on a wild goose chase. Cooper was relieved she had been able to get out of here.

"Where's the goods?" The man who pistol-whipped Tom spoke in a low, commanding voice. He was the meanest one, Cooper thought. He needed to be taken out first. The problem

was if he shot him, the other two would know his location and come after him. He may be able to get one before they were in the barn, but not both. Cooper knew better than to take that chance. He needed a strategy.

He looked around the barn. He didn't want a shoot-out in here, it was too confining. He really needed to be out in the open, not holed up here any longer. He left the loft area by way of ladder and exited through the back door of the stables. He wasn't going to be a target.

A rustling in the trees to the left of the barn one building over caught his attention. It was getting darker by the minute, the shadows playing tricks on his eyes. What was that?

He heard it again. More rustling. Someone was out there. Was it help or part of the outlaw team. He didn't know and wasn't going to take any chances finding out. Cooper felt like a piece of meat in the middle of a sandwich. If he shot the big, ugly one on the horse, someone may be hiding in the trees to come after him.

If he didn't take him out, they may wind up destroying Catherine's home. He got down on his belly, stuffing his pistol in the holster and hanging onto the rifle he'd found in the stable. He was sure it was kept there in case of wild animals. It always helped to have more than one weapon and Cooper wasn't going to leave it there for the outlaws. If they got as far as any of the barns. He wanted to put them down right there, in the middle of the yard.

He crawled away from Catherine's property toward the

rustling in the trees. He had to know what was behind him. Once he found out, he'd deal with whoever was out there and confront the outlaws. Cooper didn't like working alone, but he did what had to be done.

As he was crawling slowly to stay as quiet as possible, a boot appeared in front of his face. He froze, his hand still on the rifle. The boot came down on his hand. Shoot! He still had a free hand and he began to move it towards his gun belt. If that didn't work he had plenty more pistols up his sleeve. And in his boot.

The barrel of a gun against his temple stopped his hand. "State your name."

He knew the voice. "Noah, it's Murphy."

The gun moved away from his head. "I was hoping it was you. Tell me their location? I brought along some back up."

"In the trees? They're too loud. I heard them from over there."

"We're going to spread out. Let's go talk to the men."

After Cooper gave the men the lay of the land, Wesley and Russell led away a small group to show them how to circle the farm without being noticed. A few men hid behind the cabin tucked up against the fence line.

"The rest of you stay put. If we need you, I'll whistle two times long, one time short. I'm going to try to convince them to give up their weapons. I doubt they will, so I don't want any citizens in the crossfire. The sheriffs and we Rangers will take care of the shooting."

“If I get shot at, you best believe I’m shooting back,” one of the townsfolk told them. The others nodded and grumbled.

“Let’s not get carried away. I need you men to back us up. When they realize how many men are here, they will either give up or not live to see their next sunrise.”

“I’m coming with,” Cooper told them.

“We appreciate your help,” Noah said. “I know you have experience. The rest of the men here don’t. Let’s go.”

He believed that Noah knew nothing about him or his life before Cooper’s Ridge. Even though the two were retired, they were still making sure the area they lived in with their families was safe.

Noah and the two sheriffs made their way to the back of the house. They were going to try to surround the outlaws, who were still in the yard trying to solve the disappearance of the metal box.

Cooper and Grant made their way to the middle of the yard. They used the small shelter of a broken wagon that was perched near the well. Cooper looked in to see if there was anything else to be used as a weapon. He quietly picked up a tool that had been left inside to fix a wheel. They were so close to the three outlaws it was a wonder they didn’t hear the two.

A voice from the other side of the house had the outlaws drawing their guns and turning their backs on Grant and Cooper. “Kane Young! You are trespassing on private property. You’ve got about ten seconds to drop your guns or

you will be a prisoner of Texas Rangers.”

One of the outlaws growled. “Where did the Rangers come from? You setting us up, Kane!”

The two pointed their guns on Kane. He lifted his hands in the air. “Don’t be ridiculous.”

“Then where is the money?”

“Yeah, the money? Get it now or you are dead meat!”

Kane pointed his own gun at the largest man. “I ain’t no snitch. The woman took off with the metal box the cash was in.”

“The metal box now belongs to the State of Texas. Drop the weapons. I won’t say it again!” At the sound of Noah’s voice, Cooper was pretty sure they were about to have a gun battle. He stepped back away from the broken wagon and tossed the tool as hard as possible about three feet in the other direction. It clattered to the ground, drawing the attention of the outlaws. Guns began shooting into the night at the tool lying in the dirt.

“That’s five shots. He has one more,” Cooper said aloud.

“I counted six from the tall guy. He’s out of bullets.” Grant began to move closer to the edge, ready to spring on one of them.

“Be careful. Kane didn’t shoot any bullets. He’s got a six-shooter.”

“I know.” Grant began to run from a crouched position, taking the tall outlaw by surprise. He tackled the man and gave him a whack on the side of his head with the Ranger’s

own pistol. "See how you like that," Grant told him.

The other two scattered while Noah and the sheriffs charged forward. They couldn't really see well enough to shoot anyone, so they did what they could but Kane and the other man got away. Almost.

Cooper stood crouched by the wagon, his booted foot sticking out about five inches. When the outlaw ran by, he tripped and toppled to the ground. Cooper was on him, holding a gun to his head and a hand over his mouth. "Not a word," he ordered. The outlaw dropped his gun and gave up.

Sheriff Montana found Cooper holding him down and took over.

"I'm going to find Kane." He was by far the most dangerous man now. The other two were safely in the hands of the law, but Cooper wanted Kane. He wanted to show him what justice was all about.

He saw a shadow running towards the gate between the two properties and took off like a madman. Cooper's breathing came hard and he forced himself to go as fast as he could. Right before the man went through the open gate, Cooper leaped in the air and tackled the man to the ground.

A shot rang out. Luckily, it missed Cooper. A fist hit him upside the head, stunning him for a brief moment. Even though his head was getting dizzy, Cooper fought back. He had the man's throat in his hands and probably wouldn't have let go, but a loud hooping and hollering began so he froze.

Turning towards the noise, Cooper watched as a wagon

came hurtling down the path towards them, with about twenty women perched on the benches and standing in the back. There were two or three holding torches and the rest brandished shotguns and pistols.

Cooper almost let go of Kane when he saw Catherine at the front, holding two pistols like a seasoned outlaw. He shook himself, blinking to make sure it wasn't an illusion.

The horses slowed and then came to a complete stop, the dirt and dust billowing around the wagon. Catherine stood up, aiming a shotgun at Kane. "I've come to claim my man. Kane Young, you get off my land or I'll shoot you dead!"

Kane was on his knees, breathing heavy. It gave Cooper time to stand up now that a gun was trained on him. He swiped the dirt from his knees and stood. Before he had a chance to move, Kane pulled up his pant leg and pulled out a pistol.

Catherine didn't blink an eye. She pulled the trigger and shot the pistol right out of his hand, injuring his arm in the process. Shrapnel from the bullet rained over his hand and arm. He yelled so loudly the other men came running.

"Oh, he's crying like a girl," one of the townsfolk yelled out. The small crowd that gathered began to laugh.

"Shut up!" Kane was holding his arm. There was blood everywhere. "Somebody call the doctor!"

The law men hog-tied the three outlaws, throwing them in the back of one of the wagons and headed back to Wichita Falls. One of the outlaws complained that being hog-tied was

inhumane.

“No one messes around in my town or the surrounding area,” Sheriff Montana warned. “You’re lucky. Being hog-tied is a blessing compared to the fact that these Rangers never bring back prisoners alive.”

That’s all it took to shut him up.

Chapter 9

Cooper looked up at Catherine. Through all the chaos he realized she had been so quiet through all of the chaos. She was still standing in the wagon, the shotgun in her hand. When it began to slip from her fingers he brushed by the others and caught it before it hit the ground. Placing the gun on the seat, Cooper reached up for her. He put his arms around her waist and helped her down.

She was clearly in shock.

“Jeremiah?”

The young man made his way over to Cooper, clearly upset. “Is she all right?” he asked, concern on his face for Widow Young.

“She will be. Can you go inside and light a lamp for me?” Cooper picked her up and carried Catherine inside. He found her bedroom door and kicked it open, placing her on her bed. Jeremiah brought a lamp and placed it on her bedside table. It cast the room in shadows.

She began to shiver. Cooper found an Afghan on a rack by the bedroom door. He placed it over her and tucked the cover under her chin. “I’m so cold,” she whispered.

“Shh, it’s going to be fine. The cover will warm you up.”

Cooper poured water from the pitcher by her dresser and found a small towel to dip in. He placed the cool compress

over her forehead. He sat on the edge of the bed, knowing it wasn't proper and not really caring one bit, and began to speak to her. "It's all over, love. Kane is in the hands of the Texas Rangers, along with his two outlaw cronies."

She blinked several times before looking at him with those beautiful brown eyes. "So, I didn't kill him, then?"

"No, darling, you didn't kill him. Shook him up pretty badly. He's going to have a few scars to remember this day by." He wanted to scold her for coming here when she was clearly safe in Wichita Falls. Yet, it all turned out well in the end. How can he be upset with a woman who clearly was going to fight for her man?

"I'm glad I didn't kill him. I'm not sure how I'd be able to live with that."

"I think you need to rest. It's been a harrowing day for you, Catherine."

"I'm fine. Just a bit shook. I'd like to sit on the porch. Will you sit with me?"

Cooper placed a gentle kiss on her cheek. "Are you sure you are up to sitting outside?"

"Yes. I want to see my boys and my daughters."

Catherine tried to stand up, but Cooper swooped her up and carried her outside to the rocker. He tucked a blanket around her and went back inside to make her a cup of warm tea. When he came back out again, Naomi and Olivia were hugging her and fussing over her. Cooper stood back and watched the scene play out in front of him.

Wesley and Russell had searched the stable and barn to make sure there were no other outlaws left behind. While Cooper was certain they caught the men, he was glad they were smart enough to double-check. Then they also came up on the porch, giving their mother a hug.

“Boy, Ma, we knew you were protective, but that was some show you put on.” Wesley shook his head. “I’m glad you weren’t hurt.”

Russell was being cocky. “I think she takes after her oldest son. When trouble comes, face it head on!”

“Boys! Settle down. Your Ma is not a hero by no accounts. I just wasn’t going to let those men ruin what we have here.”

They all laughed at the way the wagon load of ladies sporting guns came barrelling down the road.

“I must say, Ma, you looked pretty formidable! I sure would not mess with you!” Wesley was her charmer. He loved to make her smile.

Cooper wondered if she’d ever leave this place? Or, if he should even ask her to. For Catherine, this was home. She loved the land. She’d protect it with her life, just like she did tonight.

She loved it the same way he loved the land where he built the town of Cooper’s Ridge. When he saw the ridge and stood there looking at the land surrounding it, he knew it was the place where he wanted to spend the rest of his life. He had a plan to give others a second chance. So far he had helped quite a few people start over. There were so many more to

help. Becoming ordained had been part of the plan.

Now, he wondered how a pastor could spend the day preaching about the Lord and turn around a minute later to kill for the woman he loves? He knew he was a different sort of pastor and that's why his congregation loved him. It was what kept bringing them back.

But, he felt like a fraud. It had been too easy to go back to his old ways. He had been blood-thirsty, wanting to put a bullet in the man who had threatened the woman he loved. He had a lot of thinking to do.

"I'm going to go check on Tom," he told Catherine, placing the cup of tea in her hands. "I'll probably camp out in their barn tonight. Take him home in the morning."

"Goodnight, Cooper. Thank you for taking care of me."

He tucked the blanket around her, giving her a sad smile. He had a decision to make and wasn't sure if she was going to like it. He leaned over and placed a gentle kiss on her cheek. "Goodnight, my love."

Cooper left her there, on the porch with her family. He looked back once and saw them all laughing. How was he going to live without her? She belonged right here. With the family she adored. He didn't want to take her away from this.

Instead of riding Uriel, he walked the long distance to the White Ranch. It took him over ten minutes but the walk did him good. He checked in on Tom who was asleep, then sat on the front porch to wait.

Nora slipped out through the screen door and sat beside

Cooper on the bench. "You took good care of Catherine tonight. Thank you."

He sighed. "Catherine took care of herself. Did you see the ladies earlier?"

"I didn't get a chance to. I was inside attending to Tom, but I heard it was quite the show."

"I can't marry her."

Nora froze. "What? I don't understand. Why, Cooper?"

He leaned front, placing his elbows on his knees, looking at the tips of his worn boots. "I can't take her away from this life. She loves it here. It wouldn't be fair."

"Why don't you let her decide."

He ran a hand through his hair. "I know. It's been a long day. I see how happy she is, how much she is willing to stand up for her land and her family. If we marry, she'll be in Cooper's Ridge, living my dream, not her own."

Nora patted his arm. "Cooper, when you are with the right person, it doesn't matter where you live. If Catherine loves you and I know she does, she'll make a new life with you."

"If you'd have seen her tonight, Nora, you wouldn't be saying that."

"You can sleep in the bunkhouse tonight if you'd like. Tom was given some laudanum so he'll sleep most of the night. Get some rest and we can talk about this in the morning. You may think differently by then."

He stood. "You're probably right. Goodnight, Nora. Thank you for taking care of Tom. He means a lot to me."

“Flapjacks for breakfast. You won’t want to miss them,” she called out.

“I heard.” Anyone who stayed here always looked forward to Nora’s famous breakfast. All he knew was it was going to be hard to sleep with all the things on his mind. He found an empty bunk and laid down, not bothering to even take off his boots.

It was going to be a long, long night.

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Catherine wanted to be up when the sun came up but found herself sleeping in. For the longest time she stared at the ceiling, realizing how much she’d miss this place when she was living in Cooper’s Ridge. She smiled and stretched. A new life with the man of her dreams. How much luckier can a gal get?

She pulled on a robe and wandered out to the kitchen. Naomi and Olivia were already there, taking over making breakfast. “Ladies, why didn’t you wake me up?”

Olivia gave her a motherly look. “Now, Catherine, you had quite the trauma yesterday. It did you good to sleep some.”

“I suppose you’re right.” She accepted the cup of coffee Naomi handed to her. Walking to the front door, she peered through the screen. “Have you seen Cooper this morning?”

Olivia nodded. “Yes. He came for his horse about an hour ago. Stopped by to check on you but you were asleep. He said

he'd see you in church on Sunday."

Sunday! That was almost a week away! She wanted to be in his arms this very moment. Catherine remembered last night before he left how he had stood apart from everyone, observing her from the other side of the porch. She had felt his eyes on her the whole time. "Does anyone know how Tom is doing?"

"They took him home in a wagon since the doctor wanted him to stay calm for a few days. He got a good knock on the back of his head, but he'll be all right. At least that's what Nora said. Oh, she went to Mill Ridge today and said to tell you she'll check in with you later this evening."

Catherine wasn't going to wait until Sunday to see Cooper. She wanted to see him now. "I think I'll take over some sweets for Tom and check up on him myself. You know, there aren't too many ladies in Cooper's Ridge yet. It's probably best a woman makes sure he is being taken care of."

She noticed Olivia and Naomi gave each other a look, and yet she didn't care one bit. After what happened last night, she was going to try to live her life to the fullest. Even if that meant going after the man she loved. Besides, she knew Cooper loved her; he'd said so! For some reason, he was giving her space. *He'll see me Sunday, my foot!*

Catherine got dressed in one of her better dresses and let her hair fall loosely over her shoulders. She had tried for over ten minutes to pin it up, but the wild tendrils kept falling from the bun. She looked in the mirror to find large brown

eyes staring back at her. Catherine looked ten years younger with her hair down. She knew it wasn't the acceptable way to dress, but Catherine didn't care about that either. She was being a rebel today, going against everything she was supposed to do and be like.

She checked herself in the mirror, imagining what Cooper would say when he first saw her. She placed a pearl necklace around her neck, since the décolletage was a bit lower than she normally wore.

“Olivia, do we have any sweets to send along when I visit with Tom?”

Olivia turned around, her eyes wide. “Don't you look beautiful, Catherine.”

Naomi stared. “Wow! Catherine, are you going to see Tom like that? Why, he'll think you want to court him.”

“Don't be silly, Naomi. This is not for Tom's eyes.”

The two gave each other a look. “Pastor Murphy? Why? He already loves you.”

Catherine placed both hands on her hips. “Well, just because he says he loves me doesn't mean I can't look nice for him.”

“Yes, but you have overdone yourself today. I'm wondering what you are up to?” Olivia spoke to her like Catherine was a young girl and she were the mother. It made Catherine smile.

“Well, he said he'd see me on Sunday at church and I'm not waiting a week until Sunday to see him. Men may think they rule the roost, but you have to show them otherwise.”

Her two daughters giggled. "I can imagine your marriage to him is going to be lively."

Catherine gave her a sly smile. "I imagine it will be. Now, I must be off. Can I take that apple pie you just made along with me?"

"Wesley will be devastated, but I just won't tell him. What he doesn't know will never hurt him. I'll make another for tomorrow."

"I appreciate it, Olivia." She turned to them both, placing a kiss on each of their cheeks. "I love you both like daughters. I'm going to miss you when I'm living in Cooper's Ridge. I'm hoping to see this house filled with orphan children."

Olivia grinned. "I plan to, Catherine. Thank you for offering us the house instead of the small cabin. Wesley said he's going to finish building it and maybe Jeremiah will want to live there. Especially since it is right across from the stables."

She patted her daughter's shoulder. "I think that's a grand idea. I want this house to be filled with love and you two have plenty of love to give."

As Catherine drove in her buggy to Cooper's Ridge, she reminisced about the years she'd worked so hard to make the farm a home for her boys. They'd been long, hard years, but she had built a legacy for her sons to carry on. She turned back to look at the Young farm. A tear slid down her cheek. She'd done well. Looking up the white, fluffy clouds that covered the sky, she thanked God for allowing her to see her children grow up to become fine, responsible men.

Now it was time to turn the page and start a new chapter with Cooper. He seemed to be struggling with something and she was going to find out what that something was. If he hadn't learned by now, the man was about to get a lesson in loving a woman!

He almost acted as if he was backing away from her last evening. As she rode along, she pondered why? He had been the one wanting her to make a decision as she asked him to take it slowly. Now, with just a look, she got the impression he was going to cancel their plans.

Catherine wasn't about to let that happen.

She drove the buggy into Cooper's Ridge with determination. Without Tom at the livery, the place seemed different. She wondered where he lived. One of the stable hands directed her to a small house beside the saloon. She gathered her basket and walked the two blocks there.

Passing the church, she wondered if Cooper was inside. Checking her skirts to make sure she hadn't gotten any dirt on the hem, she knocked on the door to Tom's house. Certainly, someone would be there taking care of him.

She was right. Millie, the plump cook from the saloon answered the door. "Come in, dear."

"I brought an apple pie," she told Millie, handing it over.

"I'm sure he'll love this. It smells delicious."

"Millie, make sure you get some, too. I'm sure he can't eat the whole thing."

"I sure can. Millie, don't you touch my pie!"

The two ladies laughed, knowing he was joking. Catherine went in to the room to say hello. “It sounds like you are on the mend, Tom. How is the head injury?”

“I feel fine but Millie won’t let me get out of bed until tomorrow. She’s claiming doctor’s orders, but I’m skeptical. Ain’t no doctor here!”

Catherine laughed and gave him a kiss on the cheek. He had always been so kind to her when she came to town. “You take care of yourself, Tom, and listen to Millie. She knows best.”

“I doubt it, but if I could have a piece of that apple pie right now, I’d probably be more inclined to behave.”

Millie shook her head. “I’ll pour you a glass of milk, too.”

Knowing Tom was in good hands, Catherine said her good-byes and stood outside, looking at the church. It stood at the forefront of Cooper’s Ridge, like a beacon drawing people into town. There were many more folks here than the last time she was here. She guessed the town was starting to grow.

Catherine had never discussed the possibility of taking in children from the orphan train with Cooper. It was time to do so. Besides, she wanted to feel his strong arms around her and perhaps get a few more of those lovely kisses he liked to dish out.

Catherine giggled to herself as she crossed the street, waving to a few people she knew. She made her way down the board walk to the church. When she entered, it was extremely quiet. Perhaps he wasn’t here after all. Then, where

was he hiding?

She went to the front of the church, taking some time to send a prayer to her Lord. If the two of them were meant to be, he'd have never brought her here to this place in her life. After several moments of prayer, Catherine was more than certain they were meant for each other.

“Catherine.” His gravely voice always made her smile.

She whipped around to find him coming towards her. He stopped when he saw her standing there, her long, wavy hair cascading around her face and shoulders. “Hi.”

He swallowed, taking slow steps until he was standing a few inches away. “You look beautiful.”

He lifted his hand to her hair, picking up a curl and letting it fall between his fingers.

Catherine was pleased. She had taken extra care to make sure he'd notice her. She held out her arms, inviting him to hold her.

He didn't hesitate but stepped forward, encasing her in his strong, muscular arms. “Oh, Catherine. I've tried to keep my distance. I can't.”

“I know,” she whispered. “Please, don't, Cooper. Kiss me instead.”

He crushed his mouth on hers, kissing her like she'd never been kissed before. When he let her go, she was out of breath, her chest heaving. She placed a hand over her mouth, worried she had been too brazen with him.

But, when he took her hand, and gently kissed each

knuckle, she melted. “If you don’t marry me, today, right now, Catherine, I’m afraid my heart will stop.”

Catherine wanted the same thing. She didn’t need to plan a wedding or reception like she’d done with her boys. She needed to be with Cooper. Today.

He took her in his arms again and held her close. His warm breath whispered across her skin. “I watched you with your family last night. I tried to back away, knowing your farm and family meant everything to you. I wound up here, walking in circles, unable to get any work done, trying to convince myself to leave you alone. I spent hours in prayer, asking God to send me a sign. When I walked through the doors of this sanctuary, you stood here.”

She moved her head slightly to place a kiss on his mouth. “If I’m your sign, then we best not waste any time.”

Cooper hesitated. “I can’t take you away from your life to live my dream, Catherine.”

“Yes, you can. Your dream sounds like a better option for me. I do love the farm. I loved it from the moment my husband and I bought it so many years ago. I’ve raised my boys and worked that farm until my fingers were raw. Do you know why? To give them a legacy they can continue on with. My grandchildren will work that farm too and perhaps theirs. My work there is done. Now, I need you more than ever, Cooper. We’ve got a lot of work here to do and if you are constantly wondering if I am going to be happy then I wonder if you truly love me?”

He stiffened. "I do love you. More than you know. I love you so much I didn't want you to lose what you loved."

She took his face in her hands. "I love you. Please, reassure me I'll never lose you, Cooper."

"Never. Miss Catherine Young, will you be my wife. Today?"

"Yes. Today."

"We have to ride to Wichita Falls to marry. Pastor Connors can officiate."

"What are we waiting for?" Catherine, in her boldness, tried to kiss him again, but he bent her back and laid a kiss on her she'd never forget. It was at that very moment the doors of the sanctuary burst open.

Cynthia Anderson stood there, arms wide. Her hair was a mess, the pins long forgotten as her pale face a mask of fear. "Help me, please!"

Catherine wiggled out of Coopers arms and closed the doors of the church. She threw the lock across to make sure no one walked in. "What's happened?" she asked, even though they both knew someone had tried to hurt her. It was obvious by the bright purple bruises on her cheek.

"My father decided he wasn't going to wait and called the preacher from Wichita Falls to marry me to my cousin. I tried to run away and he smacked me so hard I fell. I pretended to be knocked out until he left the house. He told me he was going for the preacher. I waited until he left and here I am."

"You don't have to marry anyone you don't want to,"

Cooper told her. "Let's get you cleaned up and we'll take you to Miss Addie's boarding house to hide out until we get this mess cleared up."

A loud banging on the front door caused Catherine to hesitate. "Coop, open up!"

"Tom! What's he doing here? He should be in bed resting?" Catherine followed Cooper to the door.

When they opened the door, Tom almost fell inside. He tried to stand but was wobbly. Cooper took him by the arm and guided him to a pew. "Sit down," he ordered his friend.

"I'll marry her."

Catherine and Cynthia looked at him in shock. "What!" they both cried out at the same time.

"You all deaf? I said I'll marry her."

"How did you even know?"

"I know everything that goes on in this town, even if I'm lying in a bed in the middle of the day," he complained.

Cynthia spoke up. "He's crazy! He got hit on the head so hard he doesn't know what he is saying."

"On the contrary. I'm here to solve your problem. If you don't want to marry me then you can marry your cousin! I don't care either way!"

Catherine and Cooper looked at each other. Cooper turned to the two. "I can marry you right now."

"Let's do it then. But, don't expect me to like this situation. Tom, I can't be nursing you for long. Sooner or later, you'll have to take care of yourself."

Tom laughed out loud. “It’s going to be a wild ride from here, folks. I must be delusional marrying the one and only Cynthia Anderson.”

Cynthia glared at him. When he stared back, she dropped her eyes and then lit up with laughter until tears pooled in her eyes.

“Catherine, can you rush to the mercantile for a ring, please?”

Catherine was out the door and back within ten minutes. She was so scared for Cynthia, afraid her father would try to stop the wedding. They had to do this right away.

Cynthia stood at the alter, beside Tom, who had insisted on standing up for the ceremony.

“I’m making it quick, folks,” Cooper told them. He read from a passage before having them both repeat their vows.

The moment they both said I do, the front doors burst open again.

“I now pronounce you man and wife.”

Sealed.

“Kiss your bride, Tom.”

“Yes, kiss me.”

The two kissed before everyone turned to see Cynthia’s father standing with a shotgun in his arms.

Cooper walked over to a desk area and pulled out a certificate, ignoring the man with the shotgun and began to scribble quickly. He ordered the two to sign it. After they did, he turned to address Anderson. “Your daughter was married

today. She is now Tom's wife."

He glared at them, then cursed up a storm. "Don't you come back to the farm, missy. Ever. You made your bed, now you lie in it." The man turned without a glance at his daughter and left.

Cynthia collapsed. Tom, as injured as he was, gathered her in his arms and sat her on one of the benches. He lowered himself beside her and waited for her to calm down.

"Can we go get married now, Cooper? My buggy is still hitched."

"Then, let's be off, my love."

She took his outstretched arm and gave him the most endearing smile. "It's always going to be this crazy, isn't it?"

He nodded. "Most likely. Are you sure you want to spend the rest of your life amongst all this chaos and commotion?"

She stood up on her tip-toes and laid a kiss on his mouth. "Oh, yes, Mr. Murphy. I can't imagine any other life now that I've met you."

He helped her into the buggy and placed an arm around her shoulders. "I believe a whole new life has just begun in Cooper's Ridge, now that I have you."

He leaned over for another kiss.

"How will we ever get to Wichita Falls like this, kissing every two minutes?"

Cooper laughed. "It takes at least forty minutes to get there." He pondered for a moment. "That means I can get twenty kisses on the way and twenty back."

Catherine gave him a look. “I wasn’t planning on coming back right away.”

“Oh?”

She nodded. “The Wichita Falls Hotel has a honeymoon suite.”

Cooper made the horse go faster. “Time to get this show on the road. We’ll save the kisses, my love.”

She threw her head back and laughed, hanging onto the buggy as he drove it like he was going to a fire. Yes, it was a new life, one she was anxious to get started.

She looked up, thanking God for all she had been through. It had been a long, hard life, but she’d survived and now was starting a new adventure with the blessing of a godly man who loved her.

“I think we can break the record. Let’s see if we can get to town in ten minutes,” he yelled out.

She threw him a kiss. “Let’s.”

Thank you for reading A Groom for Nora. I hope you enjoyed this series as much as I did. This is the last book of the series, but, don’t despair. Cooper’s Ridge is going to be a spin-off series coming soon. Stay tuned or join my newsletter at www.cyndiraye.com to find out when new releases take place.

Cyndi's Books

The sons of Nora White has been an interesting adventure. From the first son, I've enjoyed writing this series. The truth is, I was going to stop at Nora's story, but then my readers wanted more. Here is the reading order for this series.

A Bride for Luke - <https://amzn.to/2nSHj3P>

A Bride for Adam - <https://amzn.to/2nRgyfZ>

A Bride for Samuel - <https://amzn.to/2nQrlHj>

A Groom for Nora - <https://amzn.to/2vVDsHk>

A Bride for Russell - <https://amzn.to/2nT8Ceh>

A Bride for Wesley - <https://amzn.to/2N3NDAr>

or, if you'd like to get the first four books in one boxed set, use this link: <https://amzn.to/2xzpiwp>

Keep reading for a free chapter of my very first series, the Mail Order Brides of Wichita Falls.

Brides of Wichita Falls FREE Chapter

From Ruby - Book #1

Chapter 1

Mama,” Ruby whispered.

Her mother’s fragile hand reached out, stroking Ruby’s cheeks. She tried to speak, struggling to get the words out. “It’s urgent you leave here, today,” she gasped.

Ruby shook her head back and forth, scared for the first time in her life. She knew her mama was going to die, the sickness had been going on for some time now. Today was so real she could barely contain her fear. She leaned her face into the soft, warm hand. “I can’t leave you like this.”

“You must. I have something for you.” Ruby felt the instant loss when her mama’s hand left her face. She wanted to curl up along side of her and hold on to her so tight in hopes the only person who ever loved her would not leave yet. How cruel of God to do this to her now! How could He take her away and leave Ruby to face life alone? She wanted to stand up and shake a fist in the air, but it wouldn’t be proper to do so in front of her mother, whose staunch faith had kept her alive far longer than the doctor predicted.

A bout of coughing stirred Ruby from her awful thoughts. She grabbed a clean linen from the night stand and dabbed it across her mama’s mouth as a tiny pool of blood trickled from the corner. Her mother struggled to sit up in bed. Ruby cast a worried glance to Tillo,

who had taken care of the two of them from the time they came to live at her uncle's brownstone manor in New York City when Ruby was a small baby.

The older woman frowned before shaking her head sadly and helped to pull the dying woman up against the pillows. She tucked the blanket under her mama's chin, muttering words so soft Ruby couldn't make them out.

"I'm fine," mama said, raising her beautiful blue eyes to her daughter. Ruby watched as life came back in to them and smiled. Her mother was so brave and strong. She had proven it so many times over the years. She opened her mouth to take a sip of the laudanum Tillo offered, then pulled back with a slight shake of her head. A frail hand pushed the bottle away. "Later, Till. I need to give my Ruby something. Hand me my bible."

Tillo picked up the worn book and laid it on her lap. Ruby watched with saddened and yet curious eyes as her mother opened the leather bound book. Long, slender fingers ran over the edge of the folded papers inside the pages. She looked up at Ruby and smiled. "This is your ticket out, child. Come here." Her other hand patted the quilt as Ruby sat down on the edge of the bed.

"What do you mean, my ticket out, Mama?"

"Your uncle thinks I owe him for living here all these years, even though I've paid my way all along, thanks to these. I've cashed in my share of land certificates to save his struggling business every single time he needed help. His were gone the first year our lawyers gave them to us." Her chest rose and fell before another coughing fit started. Ruby was used to seeing her like this and hated how much pain her mama was in.

"Maybe you should drink the laudanum, Mama."

A hand touched her own. "Not yet. I rescued him many times but he's in trouble again. These last certificates I've saved for you. I told him there are no more. Do not let him find these."

Ruby glanced at the papers being handed to her. The edges shook as her mama tried to shove them in her hand. “What am I supposed to do with these?”

Her mother leaned back against the pillows and smiled as if a wonderful memory passed over her. She sighed as the papers hit the quilt. “You keep them for now. They are worth a fortune in the West. People are leaving the city in droves to find a new life where the air is pure and the city dust is far behind. You can sell these for cash or buy your own land. I was there once.”

“You were?” Ruby leaned closer. She had heard this story many times before and never tired of listening to her tales. “Tell me, Mama.”

“I met your father out West. I traveled the new rail road to visit Aunt Adeline, who was the first family member to use her land certificates. She purchased a piece of land along the rail road line, build a boarding house and made quite the life for herself.”

Ruby remembered the stories of her Aunt Adeline. A smile slipped across her face at the intensity of the way the woman paved a way for herself. She wanted to meet her so bad, but they never got the chance to travel as promised since mama got sick a few years back.

Her mother’s voice was becoming weak but Ruby didn’t have the heart to stop her. “Wesley worked for the rail road. We fell in love and I was completely smitten. We got married and planned on using my land certificates to build a ranch and farm the land. I remember a trickling waterfall, where he proposed to me one Saturday afternoon. He said we would buy the land surrounding the flowing water. He was ready to settle down, away from the rail road.” Her voice cracked as tears spilled down her cheeks.

“Mama, please. Don’t wear yourself out.”

Tillo picked up the bottle of opium for another try. “Come on, Misses, please take some medicine.”

Her mama, sweat pouring from her brow, finally nodded, allowing Tillo to tilt the rim of the bottle to her mouth. Ruby watched as her

head fell back against the feather pillows, silent as the pain began to fade away. Her mother's eyes began to droop, her breathing even now. "Finish the story, Till," she whispered, saving her strength.

Ruby's heart pounded inside. With eyes like her mothers, she raised them to the roof of the bedroom, silently berating God for giving her mother this affliction. She wanted to cry out, now more than ever and shame the very one whom her mother had trusted all these years.

A calloused hand covered her own. She looked into Tillo's troubled dark eyes. "It won't do any good to curse the man upstairs."

"I hate that God did this to her."

Tillo patted her hand. "Oh child, ain't no God who did this, it just happened."

When the door burst open, Ruby was glad her mother was drugged. She could hear Uncle Ross's short bursts of breaths as he carted his overweight body in to the room, uninvited of course. "The sickness is her retribution for defying our parents years ago. Running off to that uncivilized, savage territory out west against their wishes comes with punishment. I knew it would come back to haunt her. I told her so, over and over." He pointed a finger at Ruby. "Now you will have to pay for her punitive measures."

Ruby wanted to spit in his eye but refrained. She bit her lip when Tillo grabbed her hand and squeezed to keep her calm. It also helped to keep her in her seat when Uncle Ross leaned his fat body over her mother and pressed an ear close to her nose, as if he wanted to see if she were still breathing.

"I'm. Not dead. yet."

Ross jumped as if the very devil himself came out of her mama. It almost made Ruby laugh at the way his body fat jiggled when he jumped back. She also didn't miss the fact Tillo shoved the land certificates under her mama's quilt before Ross noticed them.

Uncle Ross glared at Ruby. "Mark my words, Ruby. You will find out your fate the moment my sister takes her last breath."

“You have no right to come in here like this,” she told him, placing a hand on her hip. He had been overbearing and rude since she was a child and she hated him for being so mean. Even if he did give them a home, it came at a price. She wanted to lash out, tell him it was his fault too that her mama was dying but refrained from doing so.

He shrugged as dark, hateful eyes bore into her own. Ruby was shaking from the top of her head to the tips of her toes for defying the man who gave them a home years ago but it couldn't be helped. She refused to let him ruin the time her mother had left. He took a step towards her, his finger pointing. “Just as I suspected, you're origins are showing with that smart mouth. No lady would behave in such a discerning manner.”

Uncle Ross took her wrist in the palm of his hand and squeezed. “Ouch,” she muttered. “Let me alone.” It was offensive the way he leaned in to speak. Fear struck at her heart. He had never crossed the line with her when her mother was healthy. She had always kept him in place. Would he hurt her? What was to become of her when mama was gone?

He leaned in and whispered for her ears alone. “I have plans for you. Big plans. Just ask Horace Lourdes. He has had his eye on you for a long, long time. You're just what I need to pay off my debt.” He whipped his hand away when Ruby's mama called out.

“Leave. Ross. Don't force me to tell your secrets. Ruby. Come here.” It didn't take long for the man to leave, banging the door shut. Ruby grabbed her wrist, rubbing it with her other hand. She clamoured to her mother's side.

“Why is he so mean, Mama, and what does he mean that I'm just what he needs?”

“My worst fear has come true.” She struggled with her words, the opiums affect making it difficult for her to talk. “You must leave, child. Today.”

Ruby shook her head back and forth. “I'm not leaving you like this,

Mama. Never.”

“Till, explain to her what will happen.” Her eyes fluttered shut. Tillo began to dab a cloth into the water basin, wringing it out and placing it over her forehead.

“Sit down, Ruby,” the woman ordered.

Ruby did as she was told. Something was off. There was more to this story than she knew. Perhaps it was time she listened. “Tell me everything, Tillo. I want to know.”

Tillo nodded as she continued to bath her misses. “When your father got killed, your mama knew there was no way she could make it out west. She came back here with a babe in her arms. She begged her parents to forgive her for running away but they banned her from ever stepping foot in their presence again. The only one who took her in was your uncle. At a price, I might add. At the time all she wanted to do was put a roof over your head. You were a wee thing without any means to survive.” Tillo’s voice lowered as she continued the story, “The thing is, your uncle has a gambling problem. His wife left him because he owed bad men. She couldn’t take it any longer and fled to her home in the South, never to be seen again. At least that’s the story the man has told. I think there’s more to it and your mama knows what happened but she’s been loyal to her brother. Not sure why, he is a bad man.”

Tillo wrung out the cloth again, placing it on her mama’s forehead. The steady rhythm of her breathing kept Ruby calm. She didn’t know where this story was going. “Now, child, none of this is your fault, you hear me?”

At her nod, Tillo continued, “Your mama was desperate, like I said, she needed to raise you up. Your uncle bargained with her for you. He said when you are at the age of marriage, you must marry Horace Lourdes, his long-time friend, the one he is indebted to. I remember that day, the two of you standing on the doorstep, having no choice but to agree to his terms.”

Ruby’s eyes widened. “I, I don’t believe mama would bargain like

that. She wouldn't give me up to a man that could be my grandfather!"

A wince came from her mama. "I lied. Never planned to do it, I swear."

"Now, now, misses. You rest, let me do the explaining."

"No." The strong voice coming from the bed shocked Ruby. Her mother was so weak and yet the voice was so bold. As if she had more energy in that moment, the frail woman pulled herself up in bed until she was sitting straight up. "It's my story and I want Ruby to know everything. I did bargain for you, Ruby, and I'm sorry. I didn't know what else to do, where else to turn. My parents banned me, the streets weren't safe for a baby and I couldn't let us be homeless. You may wonder why I didn't sell the land certificates. It's because the money would eventually run out. I couldn't take the chance. Living here with Ross was the only way to raise you right. I was young. I kept those certificates, believing some day we would go back. I never planned to keep my promise to him. Now, I'm dying, plain and simple. It's too late for me, but not for you. Here." She took the notes in her hand and handed them to Ruby.

"Where did these come from, Mama?"

"I'm feeling light as a feather right now, so I best get it all out before I can't go on. An ancestor of ours was a gambler, like your uncle, 'cept he was good at it. He won these land certificates in a poker game. They are like gold. You can buy land with these, whatever land you want, where ever you go, if no one has claimed the land, it's yours by way of these certificates. Now that Wichita Falls is becoming modernized, I thought we could go back, buy a small place and live there, the two of us. But my plans went awry when I got consumption. It may be too late for me, but not for you. Get on that train as fast as you can and claim your land. Tillo has your ticket. I instructed her to buy it a few days ago. Do it before Ross makes you marry Lourdes."

Ruby sat so still she wasn't sure she dare move. Not only was the person who loved her more than life itself leaving her, she was inclined

to leave everything she ever knew to start over. In the West. With cowboys and Indians and outlaws. She had read the penny novels, romanticized at times about meeting a cowboy and living happily ever after like she read in those tall tales. She just never dreamed she would be heading into the midst of it.

“Ruby? I’m sorry.”

“Mama. I’ll do my best. I’ll make you proud.” She swore in that moment she would never let a man like her uncle tell her what to do. No, she would follow her mother’s dream and head westward, defining a life for herself no one could take away. She remembered the stories about her brave Aunt Adeline, who forged a life on the frontier. Yes, she smiled to herself. She would be like her, a brave and powerful woman of the west and nothing in this world would stop her.



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